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Other voices, other minds

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OTHER VOICES, OTHER MINDS

Theodore J. Everett

I. Solipsism

Solipsism is the view that only myself, or my mind and its contents, is real. There are no other minds; there is no external world at all—just me and my sensations, plus their strictly internal relations. It may well be, as has often been remarked, that no one genuinely believes in solipsism. What makes the theory important is that it has been claimed to represent the limits of what can actually be known about the world. (Thus we can distinguish between metaphysical and epistemological statements of solipsism, where the epistemological may be identified with the claim that the metaphysical cannot be refuted. I will not fuss about this technicality.) We can know what our thoughts are like, hence we can know what we *think* the world is like, but we can never find out if it is actually that way. As far as each of us can tell subjectively, after all, he might be a proverbial brain in a vat, being fed his subjective experiences through a set of wires. Nothing rules this out *a priori*, and no feature of subjective experience in itself can distinguish between this or another ‘demon hypothesis’, and the hypothesis that our experiences represent reality fairly accurately.

A main goal of traditional epistemology has been the refutation of this view, based only on the internal, subjective features of one’s own experience. Descartes’s *Meditations* is the prime example of such an attempt to prove that the way things really are is basically the way they seem to us to be. But epistemologists are nearly unanimous, these days, in viewing Descartes’s efforts as a failure, and many now despair of Descartes’s project as a whole. Instead, they view any effort to refute solipsism ‘from the inside’ as either inherently futile, or, worse, completely misguided. Externalists say that any conclusive argument against solipsism must depend on objective considerations, such as the idea that natural selection favours reliable mechanisms for belief production. If such arguments plainly beg the question that traditional epistemologists thought they were asking, then so much the worse for those epistemologists, since no other kind of answer can be given. Others, such as Wittgenstein and Ryle, have argued that traditional questions about other minds and the outside world rely on a mistake about the essentially public meanings of words like ‘real’ and ‘actual’, and of mental terms in general. Solipsism cannot be refuted, they claim, because it makes no sense in the first place.

I do not intend to attack either of these views. Instead, I will show that a successful internalist response to solipsism can, in fact, be made. If the traditional problems of other minds and the external world can be shown to have plausible solutions, as I claim they do, then there will be somewhat less reason, at least, to adopt alternative approaches to epistemology in general.

I should also note that I will not claim by my arguments to have refuted *scepticism*, if that is identified with the proposition that all things are doubtful. In particular, my

arguments take both the reliability of inductive inference and the veracity of memory for granted, as well as pure, deductive reasoning. This is a limitation, of course, but not a weakness in my view. For surely, everything that we believe can be doubted; and if everything were doubted at the same time, then nothing could be said with confidence at all. The refutation of such extreme, global scepticism is plainly impossible. Solipsism, on the other hand, or scepticism with respect to other minds and the external world, is a definite view which allows that some few things are known. It is refutable in principle, then, provided one can make sufficient use of the few tools and materials at hand.

II. Second-Order Induction

I claim that new solutions to the problems of other minds and the external world are possible, by way of a technique that I call *second-order induction*. This is not a different kind of argument, but just a special case of regular induction. Where regular induction is about the properties of objects in general, second-order induction is based specifically on the truth or falsity of propositions. Instead of reasoning from this or that raven's being black, say, to the assertion that all ravens are black, one might reason from the fact that a certain group of statements is true to the conclusion that all similar statements are true. So if, for example, all those statements found in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* which I have verified so far have turned out to be true, then I have inductive reason to believe that all of the statements in that work are true. If I then discover the statement, 'all ravens are black', in the same encyclopedia, I will have an inductive reason to believe that this new statement is also true—hence, that all ravens are black. This inference succeeds, even if I have never seen a single raven myself—indeed, even if I am blind, and even if I do not know exactly what a raven is. In this way, second-order induction can function as an indirect means of confirming propositions which are otherwise unverifiable.

Consider the examples below:

First-order Induction

All observed ravens are black.

Therefore, all ravens are black.

Therefore, this (unobserved) raven X is black.

Second-order Induction

All verified statements in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (EB) are true.

Therefore, all statements in the EB are true.

Therefore, this (unverified) statement X in the EB is true.

Therefore, X.

Note that the first three sentences in the second-order case are identical in form to the entire first-order case. They just make reference to true statements instead of to black ravens. So far, then, there is nothing obviously special about the second-order case. What is special is that second-order cases of induction have a fourth step, where one can reason from the fact that some statement is true, to the statement itself. (This is just by way of Tarski's famous definition: The statement 'X' is true, if and only if, X.) So substitute the statement 'All ravens are black' for X in the second argument. If it says in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* that all ravens are black, and this gives us reason to think that the statement is true, then we now have a reason to believe something about ravens, based on evidence not about ravens.

This technique is straightforwardly applied to the refutation of solipsism. Here is how I am justified in believing in other minds. First, other people often tell me things that I can verify subjectively, for example, that I am about to feel some pain. I can discover in this way that certain other people are reliable sources in general. Next, these same other people happen to tell me that they have minds (or have their own pains, etc.). By induction on their prior testimony, I now have reason to believe that this new statement is also true. Hence, I have reason to believe that other minds exist. The same is true for the external world in general. If other people tell me that the world is external to, or independent of, my thoughts, and I have prior reason to believe that those people are reliable, then I have reason to believe that what they tell me this time will also be true. Hence, I have reason to believe in the external world.

Does this argument even make sense? In order to trust what someone else tells me, do I not need to know already that they exist, and that they mean what they mean by what they say? No. The perceptible statements of others form a part of my own stream of sensory experience. These perceptions of testimony can be correlated with other experiences, as a child learns to associate sounds like 'mommy' and 'dog' with certain clusters of visual and other sensations. I can learn, gradually, by generalisations based solely on such regular conjunctions, that the statements of certain others (e.g. my parents) are reliable. Thereafter, I am justified (to some extent, at least), upon experiencing tokens of *any* statement, in the perceptible voice of a reliable other person, to believe that that statement is true. Thus it is not, after all, necessary that I know in advance that others have minds, or even that they exist outside of my imagination, in order for me to have reason to believe what they say. If someone ordinarily reliable says 'here is your dinner', I should believe him, and expect to experience some food. If that person says 'there is water on the planet Mars', there may be nothing in particular that I should expect by way of a confirming experience. But I have reason to believe it anyway, since I have reason to rely on the *rule* that whatever this person says is true. When the same person says 'I am in pain', or 'I have a mind', or 'the world is independent of your thoughts', I have reason to believe these statements as much as any other in the same voice, by virtue of the same inductive rule. That there can be no directly confirming experiences for such beliefs is irrelevant to my justification.

Perhaps not every reader is convinced. Some may feel that this quick argument to an important conclusion simply must be circular, or must involve some other kind of unfair trick. So let me go through the whole argument again, more slowly and a bit more thoroughly.

III. Observational Reliability

Here is my main preliminary argument. I want to show that it is possible for one person to find out that another's testimony is reliable, prior to any solution to the problems of other minds and the external world. I say that one can learn this, very gradually, by ordinary inductive reasoning, through observing correlations between people's utterances and other observable events.

Assume for the moment that I have sensible knowledge of ordinary physical events, but know nothing as yet about other minds and their contents, or about the intended meanings of their words and sentences. (These are the traditional assumptions governing the problem of other minds, as distinct from the problem of the external world.) I claim that I can still make reasonable inductive inferences from and about the utterances of other people. Consider:

- (1) Denny Stampe says, 'there is a chicken in the truck'.

In order to make sure that this is understood according to my minimal assumptions, I will replace it with:

- (2) o-Denny Stampe o-says, o-'there is a chicken in the truck'.

Here, the 'o-' (observational) versions represent the sensible surfaces of the ordinary referents of their terms. O-Denny Stampe could be a robot, for all I know at this point. O-saying is the mere production of sounds, meaningful or not. And an o-sentence is only a string of such sounds, in a certain recognisable pattern, but with nothing semantic built in.

So I hear a complex sound coming from this thing o-Denny Stampe, the sound o-'there is a chicken in the truck'. I happen to look in the truck, and there I find a chicken. He o-says the same thing again later, and I find another chicken in the truck. If inductive knowledge is possible at all, it must be possible for me to associate such sounds coming from this source with the appearance of chickens in trucks. Similarly for other o-utterances and events: a system of patterns in these sounds turns out to match up with a variety of other features of the observable world. In this crude, Quinean way, through many thousands of such correlations, I can come to 'understand' the code in which o-Denny Stampe's o-statements appear. This only means that I learn that I can use these utterances predictively with some success, if I *interpret* them as statements in such a code. What is important is that ultimately, I can learn the following general fact about this source of sounds:

- (3) o-Denny Stampe is o-reliable.

That is, I can learn that his o-statements are associated with true propositions in a certain reliable way—more simply, that what he o-says, as I interpret it, is usually true. This o-reliability is plainly an adequate basis for second-order induction. If this o-person's o-statements are usually true, then his future o-testimony will count as *evidence* for the truth of whatever propositions I have learned inductively to associate with it.

IV. Other Minds

I claim that o-reliability is a proper basis for inductive inference, not just regarding observable, physical events, but also regarding mental events, or anything else that one can talk about. Consider

(4) o-Denny Stampe o-says o-‘I am in pain’.

The truth of (3) means that (4) is evidence for the truth of the proposition I associate with this o-utterance of ‘I am in pain’, because (3) means that I have (some) reason to believe that *whatever* this o-person o-says is probably true, according to the scheme of interpretation I have learned to impose on it. And if whatever he o-says is probably true, then the o-statement in apparent reference to his private mental life is probably true, as well.

This is not an abnormal induction. If we want some evidence about the dark side of the moon, for example, we can look at the visible side, and that gives us reason to believe that the whole thing is a certain way, e. g. covered with craters. If the whole thing is probably a certain way, then probably the part we cannot see is that way, too. This is just how *any* instance of induction works.

The only ‘trick’ to this argument lies in its applying induction, not to the first-order facts themselves in question, but to the truth of statements of them. Ordinarily, there is nothing to choose between the two: the statement, ‘all ravens are black’, is true, after all, just in case all ravens are black. But here, in the case of other minds, I have no direct access in principle to most of the facts that I am interested in. So it makes all the difference to induce over the observable statements other people make, given that I can find out empirically whether these sources can be trusted in general. By going up a logical level to considerations of reliability, and then back down to first-order conclusions (e. g. that Denny Stampe is in pain) I am able to jump over the wall of unobservability which separates my mind from every other.

Compare this to the traditional argument from analogy, which is a first-order inductive argument for the existence of other minds.¹ The idea is that in my own case, I can associate mental states with physical events—feeling pain when something falls on my foot, followed by my jumping up and down, etc. This gives me some kind of reason to believe that other people are also experiencing pain whenever they are jumping up and down after dropping things on their own feet, etc. But not much reason, unfortunately, since I am forced to generalise from only one observed case of a body with a mind, namely mine, to the conclusion that minds accompany human bodies in general. By contrast, in my second-order argument (as in most standard inductions) I can build up as much evidence as I want to for the general claim (i. e. that other people are reliable) first, before drawing any conclusions about unobserved cases.²

¹ Bertrand Russell denies that this argument is precisely inductive, preferring to reserve that term for arguments which extend only to potentially observable new instances. See his *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1948), p. 193.

² Stuart Hampshire has an expanded version of the analogical argument, which is the closest thing I have found to my view in print. He says that one can gather evidence for other minds, not just from the correlations between one’s own feelings and behaviour, but also from the observed correctness of ‘methods of inference’ used by others to establish one’s own states of mind. See Hampshire, ‘The Analogy of Feeling’, *Mind* 61 (1952), 1–12.

V. The External World

My inductive argument can be pushed a little deeper. In addressing just the problem of other minds, I have assumed that the major claim of solipsism is false, and taken as given the reliability of my senses and the existence of the physical world. But suppose that I do not yet know that there are physical objects, or an outside world at all. As far as I can tell, my senses might be radically deceptive, or even totally unconnected to any outside source of information. Still, as long as I am rationally capable of forming 'objects' out of patterns of sense-data (or whatever else is held to be epistemically immediate), I can make inductive inferences about the phenomenal sounds that accompany the presence of various other such patterns, such as the clusters of phenomena that I usually take to represent trucks, chickens, Denny Stampe, etc. Statement (2) above can then be replaced with

(5) p-Denny Stampe p-says p-'there is a chicken in the truck'.

Although he may be an hallucination, the phenomenal object that I want to call Denny Stampe can still be associated with the sounds that accompany his presence in my mind. As before, I can learn from sufficiently varied experience that this thing is a reliable source of information in general. Whenever I hear sounds in the pattern, 'there is a chicken in the truck', I find phenomenal chickens in phenomenal trucks. I discover that a different sound, 'here is an apple', predictively appears before this other round, red sort of phenomenon. In the same way, I learn to distinguish 'here is an apple' from 'there is an apple', 'there are no apples', 'I will bring you an apple' and so on, to the point where I have cracked inductively the bulk of the code in which these messages seem to appear. The phenomenal 'meanings' I attach to individual terms will be highly indeterminate, no doubt, especially at first. But I can still eventually gain, by this process, sufficient reason to believe that

(6) p-Denny Stampe is p-reliable.

That is, I can find out inductively that the sounds I associate with this apparent person, *as I have come to understand them*, usually represent true propositions.

Now let my source again say something useful:

(7) p-Denny Stampe p-says p-'I exist independently of your thoughts'.

I can understand well enough what this means. The terms 'I' and 'your thoughts' can be learned subjectively, by way of fairly simple ostensions. The ideas of existence and dependence, if they are not held to be innate, can be demonstrated with some further trouble (through experience with plenty of statements like 'the chicken in your truck does not exist—I was only joking', 'the size of these apples depends on the condition of the tree', and so on). Now, even if I have been supposing that Denny Stampe is merely an hallucination, my justified belief in (6) gives me reason to believe that the proposition I understand from (7), to the effect that he is *not* just an hallucination, is true. From this point on, he can continue to enlighten me about the nature of the outside world with greater and greater efficiency. As long as he continues to perform reliably, as far as I can tell, I will have reason to believe it all.

I should note a limitation of this second argument, as it applies to the distinctly physical (i.e. non-mental) side of the external world. Ordinarily, we think of our knowledge of physical reality as coming before our knowledge of other minds, and being stronger. But in my view this order of priorities should be reversed. According to my argument, we know of the external physical world *through* our knowledge of other minds, or at least of other truth-telling external things.³ The argument here for a distinctly non-mental outside reality is thus dependent on, and turns out to be weaker than, the argument for other minds.

From the point of view of an ordinary small child, there will be little difference between the second-order evidence for other minds and the second-order evidence for physical objects, because he is not in any position seriously to doubt what the adults around him say in either case. In normal instances, the parents of a small child serve not just as reliable sources of information, but as a set of epistemic authorities—that is, sources that he knows to be more reliable than himself (i. e. than all of his first-order epistemic resources combined). Thus a child, up to a certain age, will find it rational to believe in Santa Claus, say, merely on his parents' say-so, despite whatever reasons of his own he may have for doubt. When the child grows up, his parents' statements will normally still count as evidence for him, but not much more than those of other competent adults; they will not automatically trump his independent judgement. This is because he comes to realise that his own, first-order opinion on most things is about as reliable as his parents' or anybody else's, with the exception of eyewitnesses, or others in an especially good position to know something.

It is similar with one's second-order evidence for the existence of an external world, apart from other minds. A child or lay adult may well have good second-order evidence of the physical world in the ordinary course of life, but one who considers the matter carefully will come to realise that other voices in general have a limited evidential value with respect to metaphysics, both because most people are not very reliable on such issues, and because their reliability in this respect is very hard to gauge. This will not matter for as long as one is inclined to agree with his fellows, anyway. But if one encounters sceptical arguments, and finds them persuasive, things may change. In the case of other minds, every other person seems ideally placed to know whether he has thoughts and feelings (though some things about one's mental life may take an outside expert to know). So an adult can re-establish the likelihood of the existence of other minds—that aspect of an external reality—more or less at will, by following the main argument in this paper. But why should an adult believe in the physical realm on the basis of other people's say-so, when the others are in no better epistemic position with respect to the issue than oneself? Perhaps, if the other is an able and experienced philosopher, he would be better placed to know about this than the layman; but the layman can easily learn that there are many such experts, and that they disagree on the matter. I suppose it ought to give one heart that *most* philosophers are not convinced of scepticism, even if no individual philosopher stands out as an authority. But the fact that this is seriously controversial, with great thinkers on both sides, leaves the second-order question rather murky.

³ There may, of course, be other, first-order arguments for one's belief in the physical world, e.g. the argument that physical causes best explain the regularities among our sense impressions.

VI. A Problem About Meanings

It may be suggested that I cannot fully understand, within the limits of my solipsistic predicament, the statements that Denny Stampe makes by producing all these noises, etc. How can I claim justifiably to believe such statements, if I cannot even determine precisely which propositions are being asserted? How can I know, for example, prior to an understanding of the actual semantics of the English word, that it is *pain* that I am thinking about, when I say to myself that I am in pain? How can I know that it is pain that I wish to attribute to others, when I hear from them the mere sound (not the English sentence) 'I am in pain'?

My response is that we must allow beliefs to be vague, or else it will turn out that most people have no beliefs at all. Even for someone in the primitive epistemic position solipsism entertains, a requirement that beliefs should be fully articulate, and fully determinate in meaning, is plainly unreasonable. It is sufficient that beliefs should be articulated in a general, ballpark way at first, subject to clarification through further research. In the case of learning to attribute the word 'pain' to myself, for example, this is initially a matter of the crudest induction. I hear a type of sound, 'pain', and associate it with a type of feeling that occurs at the same time. The boundaries of such types will be vague, of course, but if I am to rely on any faculty of internal discrimination at all, I must be allowed to re-identify these same rough types, at least provisionally. To attribute pain to others—and still mean pain, not something about their behaviour—I need only intend that they are in a state that is somehow importantly similar to the states that I am in when I hear others say that I am in pain—that is to say, in a state like *this*, where *this* is what the word 'pain' brings to mind.

Moreover, as soon as I am in a position to use someone else's testimony as a *prima facie* ground for belief, I will also be able to receive explicit semantic information from the same source. Thus I can be guided toward more and more refined understandings of my sources' statements by their own explanations of what they mean. Even if Denny Stampe is, for all I know, a robot (or even an hallucination) he can still seem to point to things and seem to give me definitions. If he says, 'when I say that I am in pain, I mean that I am in a private state which is caused by the same things that cause you to experience what you experience when you are inclined to say that you are in pain, under certain normal conditions, etc.', this may be harder for me to figure out than what he tells me about chickens. But it is not different in principle. And again, I do not have to figure out *exactly* what he means by such statements. I can derive inductive benefit from them as soon as I have the roughest, most purely ostensive idea of how they are being used.

The Wittgensteinian concern about private meanings can certainly be pushed to more radical lengths, into a general critique of internalism—which is beyond the scope of this paper. So let me phrase my answer hypothetically. If solipsism is held to make sense as a doctrine (that is, if the problems of other minds and the external world are to be taken seriously) then there is no *special* problem about meanings that results from my solution. The thought that solipsism might be true is, after all, one of my thoughts—and by hypothesis, transparent to me. If I can know what I mean when I ask myself if there are other minds, or an external world, then presumably I can know what I mean when I answer.

Second-order induction does not necessarily depend, after all, on information coming from an outside source. I can make inductive inferences about my own beliefs, as well as about other people's statements. Suppose that I discover that my own mere inclination to believe a proposition is a reliable predictor of its being true. That is, suppose that when I notice in myself an inclination to believe something, this is usually followed by some other kind of evidence for its truth. (This is what it would be like, I suppose, to find out that one is psychic.) Now suppose that I simply find myself, one day, believing in other minds. Do I not now have a reason to believe in other minds? It seems I must, if I am to count on induction at all.

What seems strange about this example is not the form of the argument, but only the assumption that one should pull his beliefs out of thin air, and that such beliefs should turn out to be true. As it happens (for most of us, at least), one's belief in the existence of another mind, like most of one's beliefs, does not just pop into his head, but rather occurs to him in connection with his evidence for it, by way of an inference that he is at least potentially aware of. A normal person does not count himself as psychic, because he believes as he does only on the basis of such explicable evidence.

But there is a point at which the difference between a normal reasoner and a genuine psychic disappears, namely when one considers his own inferences in an abstracted way—not as coming from within oneself, as it were, but simply as part of one's experience of the world. In this way, my beliefs really do just pop into my head, although I connect them with a chain of similar 'poppings' that I like to think justifies them. Perhaps I have no better ultimate reason to believe this than the fact that such beliefs, occurring as conclusions of what I have taken to be proper inferences, have been reliably reconfirmed at various times in the past. So the mere fact that I find myself believing something does count as a reason for me to continue to do so, given my track record as a believer so far. I suspect that this kind of ongoing, overall inductive self-support provides an important element of continuity to our epistemic and psychological lives. Of course, it depends on an initial, and recurring, set of facts about the particular phenomena that we experience. Not just any set will do; only one that hangs together in a certain, good way.

This displays, I think, the essentially uncircular, empirical nature of my argument for other minds. When I conclude that Denny Stampe is a reliable source of information, this depends on the entirely contingent fact that the sounds he makes cause verifiable propositions to occur to me. The objective explanation for this fact is, of course, that Denny Stampe is a person, making statements with semantic content which I understand. But from within the solipsistic bubble, as it were, his testimony appears as a faculty of *mine*. I 'hear voices', which is only to say that I have certain experiences. I do not know, initially, where they come from. But I am able to discover that they 'tell the truth', which is just to say that I find myself believing propositions, correlated to these sounds, that I am able to verify. It is an empirical fact that I have this reliable faculty of other-people's-testimony, and that this faculty provides me with information of epistemological interest. If nobody had ever said anything to me about their minds, etc., then I would have remained in the dark about such things. It is a matter of *luck*, then, for *each* of us, that he should be provided with his own solution to the problems posed by solipsism. Not the blind, magical luck of the psychic, however—just the decent luck of living among other people who are willing to talk.

VII. Conclusion

I am afraid that my arguments, even if accepted, may still look like merely technical, tricky solutions to the problems of the external world and other minds. I believe, however, that they do represent, if a bit artificially, the way that we really come to know the relevant facts. For surely, children learn the basic nature of the outside world and other people, not by way of raw, 'autistic' experiments with undifferentiated sensations, but through interaction with their parents, by way of learning to pick out their voices, and to depend on what they say. Of course, this process is unlikely to proceed along the exact, crisply rational lines of my argument, and may well be aided by a set of biological predispositions, as Noam Chomsky and others suggest. Still, to the extent that *reasons* play a role in fundamental learning, the essential reasons are, I claim, of just the sort that I have discussed.

In any event, almost all of our knowledge as adults relies implicitly on second-order induction, regardless of how we initially acquired the beliefs in question. As Augustine argued, most of our beliefs about geography, history, medicine, etc.—even who our parents are—depend crucially on the testimony of experts, i. e. trustworthy others, who we believe are in positions to know.⁴ No reasonable person would attempt to work out all of physics for himself, for example, without consulting other physicists or teachers. Why should it be different for metaphysics? It *seems* different, at the fundamental level, because it seems that our access to testimony is blocked off by the challenge of solipsism. If I am right, and it is not, then this common form of evidence may well suffice.⁵

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⁴ See Augustine's *Confessions* 6.5. This is a crucial premise of his argument for Christianity, given the greater reliability of Christian (as opposed to Manichean, etc.) sources with respect to verifiable claims. David Hume rebuts the use of such arguments for supernatural conclusions in his famous chapter on miracles (*Enquiry* 10), but not the general idea that testimony is a main source of inductive evidence. This topic was largely ignored in recent decades, prior to the publication of John Hardwig's 'Epistemic Dependence', *The Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985), 335–349, and especially C. A. J. Coady's *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). Much of the ensuing discussion has focussed on whether we have, or need, inductive justification for the reliability of others' testimony. See, for example, Elizabeth Fricker, 'Telling and Trusting: Reductionism and Anti-Reductionism in the Epistemology of Testimony', *Mind* 104 (1995), 393–411, and Jack Lyons, 'Testimony, Induction and Folk Psychology', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1997), 163–178. Coady argues, following Thomas Reid, that Hume's inductive view of testimony (which I adopt implicitly in the present paper) does not work, and that testimony must be viewed instead as a basic, irreducible (though not incorrigible) source of knowledge, roughly equivalent to perception or memory. On this view, one's belief in other minds must be taken essentially for granted.

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