II—Katalin Farkas

The Lives of Others

On a Cartesian conception of the mind, I could be a solitary being and still have the same mental states as I currently have. This paper asks how the lives of other people fit into this conception. I investigate the second-person perspective—thinking of others as 'you' while engaging in reciprocal communicative interactions with them—and argue that it is neither epistemically nor metaphysically distinctive. I also argue that the Cartesian picture explains why other people are special: because they matter not just for the effect that they have on us.

I

Four Pages. The first four pages of Descartes's Second Meditation contain some of the most influential ideas in the Western philosophical tradition. Descartes argues that even if he is deceived by an Evil Demon, he can still be certain that he exists and is a thinking thing, that is, a creature with a mind. Descartes establishes the list of mental phenomena by asking what belongs to him even on the assumption that he might be deceived by an Evil Demon (or might be asleep). He considers various functions that Aristotle attributed to the soul. Nutrition and movement are not part of the mind, since if he is deceived by the Demon, he may not have a body, so he cannot move or be nourished. The *bodily* process of sense perception, another Aristotelian function, is discarded on the same ground. However, sensory perception in another sense is retained:

> I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly seem to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called 'having a sensory perception' is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking. (Descartes [1641] 1984, p. 20)

And with this, the modern conception of the mind, with subjective experience as its central component, is established, and offered as an

alternative to the Aristotelian notion of the soul. The leading idea behind the Cartesian conception is that the mind is the origin of a subjective point of view, and all my mental processes can remain the same as long as my situation has no subjectively undetectable differences. This applies, in particular, to the situation of the victim deceived by an Evil Demon, or to use a contemporary version, to a solitary brain in a vat.

This conception has been enormously influential, and it is my firm belief that it still forms the basis of our contemporary notion of the mind. It explains, for example, why having a sensory experience counts as a psychological process, but digestion does not. It is also my firm belief that this conception is essentially correct: that is, it offers our best chance to understand who we are and how we relate to the world.

Let me, however, clarify that in defending this conception, I am committed only to the first four pages of the Second Meditation, and not to other views that the historical Descartes had. For example, I wish to be neutral on the issue of dualism versus materialism, in harmony with Descartes's statement in the Second Meditation that he doesn't know yet whether he is identical to the body or not. I don't follow him to the questionable argument of the Sixth Meditation.

In the same spirit, I am also neutral on the bodily realization of mentality in the subject. The historical Descartes had all sorts of views about how mental states are related to the brain, and many of these views were mistaken. Evan Thompson and Diego Cosmelli argue that the 'vat' in which a brain is kept alive (which I take to be necessary for having experiences) must be built pretty much like a human body (Thompson and Cosmelli 2011). If the empirical realization of having the kind of experiences we have now requires not just a brain but also a body, this is fine with me. It's important to note that we are talking about *empirical* realization here. The claim is not that experiences *constitutively* depend on certain objects.

On the Cartesian picture, even if I was the only being in the world, my situation could be subjectively indistinguishable, and hence all my mental features could remain the same. In this sense, it is part of the very nature of the mind that it is *internal* or *individualistic*. This picture has come under a lot of criticism. One particularly worrying feature, some claimed, was the loss of other people. This is how Gilbert Ryle describes Descartes's 'Myth':

> The mind is its own place and in his inner life each of us lives the life of a ghostly Robinson Crusoe. People can see, hear and jolt one another's bodies, but they are irremediably blind and deaf to the workings of one another's minds and inoperative upon them. (Ryle [1949] 2009, p. 3)

Ryle's description is echoed by some of the phrases in the first section of Dan Zahavi's insightful paper 'Observation, Interaction, Communication: The Role of the Second Person' (2023). According to a certain widespread view, Zahavi tells us, we cannot observe other people's minds directly; instead, knowing other minds is based on inference to the best explanation. On this view, 'Strictly speaking, I cannot see the other's sadness, but only drops of liquid rolling from the eyes, contortions of the facial muscles, and broken sounds' (Zahavi 2023, p. 82). Zahavi contrasts this with the suggestion that we see other people's feelings directly in their expressive behaviour. In particular, he investigates the situations when people engage in a communicative situation, by addressing each other in the second person. Throughout the paper, the idea of a solitary mind keeps coming under pressure by the suggestion that interaction with other people can be constitutive of certain mental features.

The purpose of this paper is to show that the defender of the Cartesian picture need not worry about any of this. I will not argue that the Cartesian conception is superior to the alternatives, so I cannot hope to convert anyone who doesn't already feel the pull of the picture. The ambitions of this paper are more modest: I will show that a Cartesian can find a place in her theory for thinking about the lives of others.

II

Relations with a Mental Component. On my Cartesian conception, all my mentality could be the same even if I were a victim of a large-scale demonic deception, as long as my situation was subjectively indistinguishable. Of course, I don't think that we are actually deceived by the Demon, and nor did Descartes. We are not solitary beings: there is a world around us, and we meaningfully engage with it through our experiences and our actions. We have a host of concepts that express precisely such relations. One group describes our successful epistemic engagements with the world: for example, *seeing*, *perceiving* or *knowing*. Seeing is relational: when I see something,

that thing exists. I could not stand in this relation if I were deceived by the Demon, from which it follows (for the Cartesian) that seeing is not entirely mental: it is a state which merely has a mental *component*. The same is true for knowledge. Knowing something about the world is a relation to that part of the world, and this relation doesn't exist for the Demon's victim. Thus knowledge is not a mental state either, but it has a mental component.

If knowledge is not entirely mental but has a mental component, it is tempting to assume that we can analyse it reductively, by explaining what else needs to be added to the mental component to result in knowledge. This temptation can be resisted, especially after the failure of many such attempts. When I say I know something, I indicate that I (and my mental episodes or mental states) stand in a certain relation to the world. This relation may well be unanalysable, and its concept may be understandable independently of other concepts used in the vicinity.[1]

One way to work out such a view would be to adapt Timothy Williamson's 'knowledge first' view (Williamson 2000) for Cartesian purposes (with apologies to Williamson, who would probably be horrified by the idea). Williamson argues that the concept of knowledge comes first and cannot be analysed to individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions, for example, in terms of belief, truth and justification. Williamson, unlike me, holds that knowing itself is a state of mind, but I contend that this claim is independent of the claims about the priority of knowledge, and his argument for this claim can be resisted. The view can still incorporate the insight that even if knowledge entails belief, it may not be analysable as belief plus something.

I propose a similar approach to our non-epistemic relations to the world which have a mental component. Zahavi (2023, p. 91) recalls Thomas Reid's distinction between 'solitary' and 'social acts' of the mind. Here is Reid:

> A man may see, and hear, and remember, and judge … without the intervention of any other intelligent being. They are solitary acts. But when he asks a question for information, when he testifies a fact …

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[1] The question of how developmental evidence bears on the priority of philosophical concepts is a complex one that I cannot tackle here. But the view canvassed here would be sympathetic to, for example, the idea that the concept of knowledge is developmentally prior to the concept of belief. See Phillips et al. (2020).

> when he makes a promise, or enters into a contract, these are social acts of mind, and can have no existence without the intervention of some other intelligent being … (Reid [1785] 2010, p. 330)

Note that seeing and remembering are given as examples of solitary acts. Since these are both factive, and hence cannot be shared between a person and her deceived counterpart, they cannot be regarded by the Cartesian as entirely mental, only as containing a mental component.

Reid's view of social acts is contrasted by Zahavi with the account offered by Adolf Reinach, one of Husserl's students (Reinach [1913] 2010). Both Reid and Reinach agree that social acts have to be accompanied by an outward expression. The Cartesian can also find a place for this observation in her view. The experience of promising through public acts is part of the phenomenology of making a promise. A subject will *experience* that she is doing this, even when she's deceived by the Demon, and this will leave its mark on the mental nature of the act.

What is the relation between the mental act and the other people who participate in these social acts? According to Zahavi, Reinach sees a promise as *in need of* an uptake, but this need may not be satisfied, so a promise can be made without an actual uptake. Hence Reinach seems to allows for the possibility that the last person left on Earth could make a promise (Zahavi 2023, p. 82).

In contrast, Reid is seen as offering a more externalist account. Zahavi recalls Richard Moran's discussion of Reid (Zahavi 2023, pp. 82–103). Moran (2018) takes Reid's idea that social acts of mind 'can have no existence without the intervention of some other intelligent being' very seriously. He asserts both the full (and not only partial) mentality of these acts and their essential dependence on other people.

Clearly, my Cartesian account cannot agree with this, but I can describe all relevant factors in Cartesian terms. When participating in social acts, I experience my own public expressions and the involvement of other people—just like my demonically deceived counterpart would *seem* to do. The strictly mental component is what we share. This doesn't mean that we are obliged to analyse these relations in terms of an independently intelligible internal component plus some external factors. In characterizing this mental component, we can freely refer to the social acts that we (seem to)

perform. Maybe the best way to characterize a certain mental act is to say that it's the experience of (seeming) to make a promise.

I can't show here that my account is superior to that offered by Reid or Moran; as I mentioned in the first section, this is not the aim of this paper. The point of these paragraphs is to explain how social acts, not *of* the mind (there aren't any of those, strictly speaking), but *involving* the mind, can be accommodated in this conception. In what follows, I will elaborate further on how the lives of others appear in the Cartesian world.

III

First and Third Person. The Cartesian picture famously contrasts first-person and third-person knowledge of mental states. I am directly aware of my own conscious experiences, and this awareness provides a way of getting to know them. This is often called 'privileged access', which doesn't have to mean either infallibility or omniscience or exclusivity: we can be wrong about our conscious features, we don't know everything about our conscious features, and others can also know our conscious features. The access is privileged only in the sense that I can get to know my conscious mental features in this special way, and my view has a default epistemic authority over the view of others who don't have such privileged access.[2]

Experiences belong to single subjects, and hence the subject is the only one who has the direct awareness that is required for privileged access. Other people can know her mental states via a different route.

What is this route? As we have seen above, philosophers sometimes complain that Cartesians view the knowledge of other minds as a two-stage process: a sensory observation of meaningless behaviour, followed by a separate theoretical interpretation of this behaviour. And this is implausible, partly on phenomenological grounds. Our engagement with other people's mental life seems much more direct than this.

I do not think that the minimal Cartesian—of the four pages of the Second Meditation—is forced to accept this two-stage picture. It

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[2] I argue in Farkas (2008) that this kind of privileged access is the distinguishing feature of the mind, and that this is precisely the feature that plays a decisive role in Descartes's test in the Second Meditation.

seems to me that various elements of a possible broader Cartesian picture are sometimes mixed up in these complaints. For example, Zahavi writes:

> Central figures in phenomenology have long taken an embodied approach to the question of interpersonal understanding, and have argued that the real challenge isn't about bridging the gap between visible but mindless behaviour and invisible but disembodied mentality … (Zahavi 2023, p. 83)

I'd like to believe that I can be in full agreement with the central figures in phenomenology.[3] It is one thing to claim that experiences belong to single subjects, and they have a kind of access to them that no one else has; it's quite another to say that mentality is disembodied and invisible. As I said earlier, the Cartesian of the Second Meditation is committed neither to dualism nor to any specific view on the physical configuration of the subject's body. Zahavi recommends that 'observation of bodily expressions and expressive behaviour might directly inform us about the other's mind' (2023, p. 83), and I hope a Cartesian can follow this recommendation in good conscience.

   I will not elaborate further on this, since the general topic of knowledge of other minds is not the focus of this paper. Nor it is central to Zahavi's paper: he is interested in the situation when we get to know someone in a face-to-face encounter. More specifically, his interest is not so much in the knowledge gained here, but rather the very nature of this engagement: the second-person relation. I turn to this topic in the following sections.

IV

The Second-Person Perspective. In the previous section, I contrasted first- and third-person access to, and knowledge of, conscious episodes. How does the *second* person fit into this?

   The first-person and third-person perspectives are different ways of thinking of people, and the second-person perspective is

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[3] Especially because the programme of phenomenology seems to be based precisely on the conception the Second Meditation. Husserl was also a Cartesian in this sense. However, I realize that interpretative issues around this question are controversial, as Zahavi himself argues in other work. See Zahavi (2004) and the papers in Zahavi (2008).

yet another way of doing the same. Inspired by Husserl's work, Zahavi flags two central features of a second-person relation: *communication* and *reciprocity*. Drawing on Zahavi's convincing characterization, and also on Matthew Benton's work (Benton 2017), I will regard a second-person *encounter* as fundamental and, somewhat stipulatively, define it as follows. In a *paradigmatic* case of a second-person encounter, two (or more) people engage in a communicative interaction which involves recognizing the others as engaging in the interaction in the same way. 'The same way' covers a range of features: each person knows she is conscious, she is engaged with the others, she recognizes that others are engaged too—so she thinks the others are also conscious, engaged with the others, and so on. A second-person perspective is given by thinking of others as 'you' in a second-person encounter.

This is the central and paradigmatic case, and actual cases of the second-person perspective can depart from these features to a smaller or greater degree. If I don't pay full attention to what you say, I could still be a part of a second-person encounter, but if my mind completely wanders off, the encounter may be broken. When we interact with little babies, their communicative means are limited, and we do not think of them as engaged in exactly the same way as we are, since they don't have the same range of thoughts and feelings as we do. Writing a letter to a loved one who is in another country, addressing a silent soliloquy to a dear friend who has passed away, all involve thinking of people through something like a second-person perspective, even if these situations lack some of the features of second-person encounters.

Second-person encounters have tremendous emotional, social and ethical significance. Only people whom we have encountered second-personally can have certain distinctive values for us, and the relation we have with them also carries a distinctive value. What follows below is not meant to deny any of this. I will focus on one specific point: on the question of the *epistemic* distinctiveness of second-person perspectives. The first-person and third-person perspectives came with different types of epistemically significant access and hence different ways of getting to know mental features. I contend that the second-person perspective does not add yet another form of access. In other words, the second-person perspective is not epistemically distinctive.

There are two parts to my support of this claim. In the next section I will argue that we gain propositional (and practical) knowledge from the second-person perspective in the same manner we gain such knowledge from the third-person perspective. Unlike the first person, the second-person perspective provides no special access. In §VI, I will address the issue of getting to know people (in the 'connaître' or 'kennen' sense) through second-person encounters. Even though this relationship is special, I will argue that it does not properly belong to epistemology.

<div align="center">V</div>

Second- and Third-Person Knowledge. My first contention is that in learning facts about other people's mental lives, there is no significant epistemic difference between second-personal and third-personal perspectives. Second-personal encounters normally provide the possibility of close inspection, and they often involve people talking, but these features can be present in a third-person encounter.

The film *The Lives of Others* (directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmack, 2006) is set in East Germany in 1984, and narrates how a Stasi secret agent becomes deeply involved in the life of a writer he has under surveillance. The agent listens to some of the writer's most revealing and personal conversations and comes to genuinely care about him. It is a powerful movie which makes the increasing absorption of the agent in the lives of others utterly believable.[4] From a purely *epistemic* point of view, the agent's knowledge, in terms of both its content and its matter of acquisition, doesn't seem to be any different from knowledge acquired in a second-person encounter. For example, if we can hear other people's despair or joy directly in their voices, the agent could hear the despair and joy the same way through his surveillance equipment. There is, of course, a crucial difference between listening to the interactions and

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[4] I still didn't like the movie. The main character, Dreyman, is portrayed as a celebrated star of the regime who seems at the same time a thoroughly decent person. Affected by a friend's suicide, Dreyman gets gradually disillusioned with the system. To my ears, the idea that in the year 1984 there could be a person who is both a decent person and a protégé of the East German regime felt utterly incongruous. Having grown up in another communist country, I find it incredible that in 1984 such a person could have any illusions about the system. The film has undeniable virtues: the performances are powerful, the direction is excellent, and if it were about a completely fictional situation, it would work. But given its connection to actual events, to me, it felt disturbingly dishonest.

being part of them, but the difference is not epistemic but rather emotional or social (more on this in the next section).

It was evidently important that a lot of personal interactions *took place*: we can learn about the thoughts and feelings of people from watching or hearing them talking, reacting, arguing, rather than from watching them sleeping or looking at the internet on their phones. And people more frequently engage in these activities when we have second-person encounters with them. This is similar to the behaviourist explanation of why we know most about our own mental life, given that on their account, we learn about our own mind and other minds in the same way: we simply spend much more time with ourselves than with anyone else. Second-person encounters offer more data about the mental lives of others, but our access to the data is fundamentally the same as in third-person cases.

As we shall see in the next section, second-person encounters result in people *getting to know each other*, and this interpersonal knowledge is symmetrical (at least in the central and paradigmatic cases): when I get to know someone, they get to know me. So the relation of knowing people always involves more than one subject. This I am happy to acknowledge. However, I will argue in the next section that knowing people is not really an epistemic relation. In contrast, if we just look at *what we learn* about other people in these encounters, I see no reason to award a special status to second-person perspectives, as opposed to a careful third-person observer who has an access to similar data.

VI

Knowing People. What about the apparently epistemic achievement developed through repeated second-person encounters—*knowing people*? Many philosophers have argued that knowing people is in some sense special. And if that is true, given the intimate connection between the second-person perspective and knowing people, maybe the second-person perspective has its own characteristic contribution to knowledge. However, I argue in Farkas (2019) that knowing people is not an epistemic relation. I revisit the main line of argument in the following paragraphs.

The distinctive nature of knowing people is often approached through asking whether it is reducible to knowing some facts (or propositions) about those people. Tim Crane (2012) argues that

knowing people requires some factual knowledge: there are no situations where we know someone without knowing a single fact about them. But most philosophers—including Crane and myself—still agree that knowing people is not *reducible* to factual or propositional knowledge; it requires more than that.

One argument in support of this claim points to the reciprocity present in interpersonal knowledge (see Benton 2017). Knowing someone cannot consist in just one subject's propositional knowledge, the argument goes; for it needs the other person to do something towards me. The requirement is not only that this person exists—this is true for all objects of knowledge—but that this person should have certain attitudes towards me.

This is a tempting argument, but I don't think it is quite conclusive yet. A possibility, not yet excluded, is that knowing people indicates knowledge that is *acquired* under special circumstances. Compare this case to the notion of first-hand knowledge. A lot of first-hand knowledge is propositional: first-hand knowledge is special, not in its content, but in the way it is acquired. The situation could be similar for the kind of knowledge that we gain from second-person encounters. Indeed, this could be the right account for other forms of objectual knowledge: for example, knowing places. Perhaps knowing a place consists in factual knowledge about a place that was acquired through personal visits. (I argue in Farkas 2019 that this is the right understanding of knowledge by acquaintance.)

However, when it comes to knowing people, it seems that the emphasis is on the encounter itself, rather than the knowledge gained through this encounter. For example, it is common to say things like 'I *knew* a girl in school who did such and such'. My propositional knowledge of her may still be intact, but our second-person encounters ceased, and this can explain why we use the verb in the past tense.

In Farkas (2019), I compared this situation to another sense of 'know', namely, knowledge in the biblical sense (or 'carnal knowledge'). Knowing someone in the biblical sense means having had sex with that person. We certainly gain propositional knowledge about people when having sex with them, and maybe this knowledge cannot even be gained through other modes of access. It is still very clear that knowing someone in the biblical sense does not refer to the propositional knowledge gained in this special way, but it refers to the encounter (or we may say: intercourse) itself.

I suggested that knowing a person is similar, in the following sense: the emphasis here is not on the knowledge (propositional or other) that we gain through specific circumstances, but on the encounter itself. However, this encounter is not itself an epistemic relation. In the paper mentioned above, Matthew Benton (2017) argues that interpersonal knowledge denotes a relation that is different from knowing other objects, for example, places. I agree, but I would go further: interpersonal knowledge, just like knowledge in the biblical sense, is not strictly speaking knowledge, and its proper study is not epistemology, but the study of social, personal and emotional relationships.

VII

The Brain in a Vat and Other People. In the previous sections, I introduced the Cartesian picture of the mind, based on the first four pages of the Second Meditation. On this picture, there is an important epistemic difference between first-person and third-person access to mental states. I described the second-person perspective, which is the perspective people stand in when they participate in second-person encounters. I argued that the second-person perspective is not epistemically distinctive, and that the relation born out of repeated second-person encounters, interpersonal knowledge, does not properly belong to the subject matter of epistemology. In this section, I turn to the question of how other people are present in the experienced world of a Cartesian subject.

In the 1999 movie *The Matrix* (directed by the Wachowskis), people live in a virtual world sustained by evil machines, not realizing that they are bodies floating in tanks and being harvested for energy. Only a handful of rebels managed to escape, move around in their bodies, and interact with real things. The spartan world of the rebels lacks many of the comforts of the virtual world in the 'Matrix'; for example, the rebels feed themselves exclusively with a nutritious but quite disgusting looking mush.

There is a memorable scene when a character named Cypher re-enters the virtual world of the Matrix after nine years spent with the rebels. Cypher is sitting in a (virtual) restaurant and is contemplating a piece of perfectly cooked steak speared on his fork. 'I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine

years, you know what I realize?' He puts the meat in his mouth, chews, closes his eyes in visible enjoyment, and answers his own question: 'Ignorance is bliss.'

The Matrix was praised for its pioneering use of CGI effects, but the philosophical ideas it conveys are convoluted and often in tension with each other. This is a case in point. Cypher knows perfectly well that the steak is virtual, and yet this fact doesn't seem to interfere at all with his thorough enjoyment of it. So why should he wish he was ignorant? He would not enjoy the steak more if he thought it was real.

The lesson is rather that when it comes to things like steaks, their main point is how we experience them. This observation is compatible with quite different metaphysical views. One could be an idealist and hold that the steak is nothing but a collection of experiences. This view takes it very seriously that the point of the steak is how it affects us: not only the significance, but also the existence of the steak is exhausted by our experience of it.

Or one could have David Chalmers's view (Chalmers 2022), and hold that for the inhabitants of the Matrix, virtual steaks are just as real as non-computational steaks for us. Or one could be a straightforward realist but hold that perfectly manufactured virtual steaks are just as enjoyable as non-virtual steaks (I think that this is probably Cypher's position). None of these views would require ignorance to achieve bliss.

This approach can be extended to large part of the furniture of our lives. Suppose I had a challenging but invigorating hike in the Alps, rewarded by a stunning view on the mountain top, followed by a delicious dinner and rest in a comfortable bed in a welcoming chalet. If perfect simulation was possible, I really wouldn't mind whether the experience was virtual or not.

However, the situation seems very different when it comes to other people. While I'd take a virtual steak over a non-virtual steak any time (in fact, I'd prefer the former, since it would not require killing any animals), the thought that my friends or my family could be simply created by a computer program is thoroughly disturbing. In fact, it is this situation, not Cypher's, where bliss could be achieved only through ignorance. If I learned that the others in my life are not real people but just strings of zeros and ones, my world would collapse.

When elaborating on the notion of a second-person perspective, Zahavi states:

> It is clearly not sufficient for a second personal relation that *A* addresses *B* as someone who could potentially address *A*. What is needed is not the possibility of mutuality, but its actualization. Even more importantly, whether I encounter someone from a second- or third-person perspective isn't simply up to me and my intentional stance. I cannot unilaterally transform a he or a she into a you. Rather, you-awareness is a joint accomplishment, and requires the participation of both parties. (Zahavi 2023, p. 92)

Zahavi here draws on the work of Naomi Eilan. In the introductory essay of a special issue of *Philosophical Explorations* on 'The Second Person', Eilan writes: 'There is a kind of thinking about another, you-thinking, which is essentially relational …' (Eilan 2014, p. 271). In characterizing the conscious perspective of one who engages in this kind of thinking, we need to refer to the other person's conscious thinking. If we try to subtract the second person (which we presumably must do for a solitary brain in a vat, because there is no one else there), we are left only with something less than the full experience of another, we are left with a simulacrum.

As a Cartesian, I must resist this idea. Of course, if my communicative partner is not a real person, something *is* a simulacrum—namely, her. But the nature of my mental state is exactly the same (as long as appearances are preserved). It might seem that Zahavi's and Eilan's view somehow attributes more importance to other people by making them constitutive of my experiences. I offer a different account of why other people are special. The point is not that if other people didn't exist, my experiences would be different. Rather, the point is that if they were simulacra, my experiences would be exactly the same—but *the lives of others matter not just for their effect on me*. This is the difference between steaks and people.[5]

VIII

Whose Lives? I would like to use the position expounded in the previous section to characterize our perspective on other people.

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[5] I am confident that steaks matter to us only for their effect on us (including their nutritional value), and many other items of the material world have the same status. I am also confident that people matter to us in a different way. I am not sure though that *only* people matter this way. I am open to the possibility that the second group contains other kinds of entities.

It has been often pointed out that the overarching sceptical doubt of the Evil Demon hypothesis is highly contrived. Our natural attitude towards the world takes for granted, without even formulating this assumption explicitly, that the world around us exists, and it includes steaks, mountains, as well as other people, whose existence is independent of us.

In one sense, then, the phenomenology of our everyday experience does not distinguish between people and other things. In another sense it does, and this has to do with the perceived significance of other people, or the way their lives matter to us. Other people figure in our lives as having a significance beyond the difference they make to our lives.

This feeling seems to be echoed in a number of philosophical ideas. Zahavi mentions that conversations have the following normative dimension: we recognize the other person's autonomy, that she has a perspective of her own (Zahavi 2023, p. 82). I see a remoter echo also in the Kantian idea that people are ends in themselves, though there are important differences. My point is not ethical, but phenomenological, and as the following considerations show, only a small part of humanity appears to me in this way, whereas I have no doubt that the whole of humanity has the same moral status.

Is this perspective the same as, or at least essentially related to, the second-person perspective? Do these two approaches come to the same thing, giving a unified characterization of our perspective on other people? The answer is no, not quite. There is an important and non-coincidental overlap between the second-person perspective and the perspective of acknowledging the transcendent significance of other people. But they are not quite the same.

I proposed in §VII that one way to bring out the significance of other people's transcendent existence is to reflect on the experiences of a solitary brain in a vat. To be clear, if I were a brain in a vat, the phenomenology of my experiences would be exactly the same: other people would still *appear* to me as autonomous centres of their own existence. The revealing moment is to contemplate what would happen if I learned that this autonomy is an illusion and other people are just bits of the computer program: this possibility is thoroughly disturbing.

Now the question is: which people are we talking about exactly? It may be tempting to include the whole of humankind, but to be honest, for a lot of them, I could fairly easily come to terms with their being computer generated.

In 2006, the Hungarian polling company TÁRKI ran a survey to assess the acceptance or rejection of asylum seekers by Hungarians.[6] They asked if asylum seekers should be automatically accepted, or whether there should be further considerations, for example, based on their ethnicity. The 61% who responded that there should be further considerations were asked if various ethnic groups should be accepted or not. While only 4% responded that ethnic Hungarians (coming mainly from neighbouring countries) should be rejected, 59% said they would not welcome people who belong to the Piresian ('piréz') ethnic group. If you haven't heard of Piresians, don't worry. As it turned out, Piresians don't exist, they were invented by the creators of the survey.

What is upsetting about this story is that so many respondents had a hostile attitude towards a group whose only feature possibly available to them was that they were not Hungarian. But I don't think anyone felt a great loss by finding out that Piresians don't exist. I must confess that I could receive the news of the non-existence of many countries or nations with similar equanimity. The people whose loss would matter a great deal are those whose individual lives touched mine, in one way or another.

I know many of these people, but not all of them. And I had a second-person encounter with many of them, but not all of them. There are others whom I admire, or whose life story deeply moved me. This is how the Stasi agent, Wiesler, feels about Dreyman, the writer he has under surveillance in the film. Importantly, they never meet, they never exchange a single word. Yet Dreyman is present for Wiesler as another person whose life has a fundamental significance.

IX

Summary. I started with the central feature of the Cartesian conception of the mind: that I could be a solitary being and still have the same mental states as I currently have. Given the pressure on this picture by various accounts of our relationship to other people, I asked how the lives of other are seen from the Cartesian perspective. I investigated the second-person perspective: this is the perspective

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of thinking of others as 'you' while engaging in a communicative interaction with them. Of course, these encounters have an enormous significance in our lives, but I argued that they are neither epistemically nor metaphysically distinctive.

Through second-person encounters we get to know people, both in the sense of learning things about them ('wissen') and in the sense of establishing the relationship of interpersonal knowledge with them ('kennen'). However, the former kind of knowledge can also be acquired from the third-person perspective when the circumstances are right. The second kind of 'knowledge' can only be acquired from second-person encounters; however, it is a relationship between people that does not really belong to the subject matter of epistemology.

On the Cartesian picture, experiences of people participating in second-person encounters don't have a special metaphysical status, in that their experiential character does not depend on the presence of the other persons in the relationship; in principle, a solitary brain in a vat could have exactly the same experiences. In this, experiencing other people doesn't differ from the experience of anything else in the world. However, the Cartesian picture offers a way of accounting for the special status of other people, by revealing that unlike most other things, people matter to us not just for the effect that they have on us. We have second-person encounters with many people whose lives matter this way to us, but the lives of others can touch ours not only through second-person encounters.[7]

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