

My Kangaroo

Review of K. Farkas, *The Subject's Point of View*, in *TLS* (20 November 2009)

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In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the French philosopher René Descartes contemplates the possibility that everything he perceives and believes is implanted in his mind by an evil demon whose sole purpose is to “lay traps to his credulity”. For all I know, Descartes concludes, I have no hands and no eyes, and am in fact nothing but a disembodied soul floating about in an otherwise empty world and undergoing an elaborate hallucination. There is, however, as Descartes observed, one thing the evil demon cannot be deceiving me about. This is the fact that I am thinking about the possibility that he may be deceiving me. If I seem to myself to be thinking, then I am thinking. Furthermore, the evil demon cannot make it the case that I seem to myself to be busy doubting the existence of my hands, when in reality I am busy working out a mathematical proof or trying to remember my great aunt’s name. When it comes to my inner conscious life, appearance *is* reality: what I seem to myself to be thinking and what I am in fact thinking are one and the same, or else are tied up in such a way that a dramatic gap between them is impossible.

This Cartesian outlook creates a principled divide between self and world, mind and reality. For there is a genuine asymmetry between our access to ourselves and our inner life, on the one hand, and our access to the external world, on the other. This asymmetric access has two aspects: in certain fundamental respects, we know ourselves better than we know others, and we know ourselves better than others know us. In retrospect, the discovery of asymmetric access is not all that surprising. Consider: what am I visualizing right now? The correct answer is: a three-headed kangaroo. But how is it that I knew the correct answer when you could not? Evidently, I have a special access to the facts about what I am visualizing, or more generally thinking, that you lack. However, over the past several decades philosophers and psychologists have often taken upon themselves to deny the obvious. Influential philosophers such as Harvard’s Hilary Putnam have argued that our minds are necessarily in tune with the external world, and it is merely due to misunderstanding of the nature of mentality that we may come to think otherwise.

The critique of asymmetric access did lead to important refinements of our pre-philosophical conception of mind, but often also to fundamental distortions of our understanding of it. On one hand, Freud and his followers were correct to point out that the conscious, explicitly experienced part of our mental life is only the tip of the mind’s iceberg, and that much of what drives us and configures our behaviour in everyday life is due to unconscious, heavily clouded processes to which we are by and large blind. Likewise, cognitive scientists are right to note that one’s conscious

mental life is the end product of mostly unconscious processes whose nature one has no special insight into. But what is true about these observations is only that there may be more to the mental than conscious experience. This undermines neither the notion that we have special, asymmetric access to our own conscious experience nor the thought that any plausible conception of mind must be grounded in, and organized around, an accurate portrayal of conscious experience. Conscious experience may be the tip of the mental iceberg, but it is only in light of the tip that we make sense of the bulk.

The primary challenge for philosophy of mind today is arguably the articulation of a clear, precise and rigorous conception of mind that accommodates the contributions of Freudian psychologists and cognitive scientists while at the same time fully acknowledging the primacy of conscious experience and the basic Cartesian insight of asymmetric access. This new book from Katalin Farkas, a professor of philosophy at Central European University in Budapest, is one of the first attempts to face this challenge.

Farkas's starting point is the question of how to demarcate the domain of the mental and set it apart from the rest of reality. Given any phenomenon P, how do we determine whether P is a mental or non-mental phenomenon? The short answer is that P is mental just if it is introspectible: what is mental is what we can learn about with the faculty of introspection. The long answer involves a fuller account of the nature of introspection and how it delivers privileged access. Farkas's account is elaborate and sophisticated, but its core is the thought that introspection can be characterized as that faculty which provides one with knowledge nobody else can acquire using the very same faculty. Introspection is the faculty that gives me the kind of knowledge I have of what I am visualizing right now that nobody else can have using the same faculty.

Thus Farkas's account manages to give asymmetric access its due. It is less clear to me that it accommodates the place of the unconscious as well. Farkas recognizes that some unconscious phenomena are not introspectible. A person in denial, for example, or for that matter an animal incapable of introspection, may have an unconscious memory utterly inaccessible to him or her. Farkas proposes that such phenomena qualify as mental because although they are not introspectible in these contexts, there are other contexts in which they are. The unconscious and non-introspectible memory is mental because the very same memory *could* in principle occur consciously and be accessible to introspection. This manoeuvre leads, however, to an uncomfortable dilemma: either unconscious memory bears no significant similarity to conscious memory, in which case unconscious memory, quite incredibly, does not qualify as mental; or unconscious memory is similar to conscious memory in crucial respects, in which case these respects are more essential to its status as mental than introspection and asymmetric access.

My sense is that the relationship between asymmetric access and the essence of mind is more elusive than Farkas's direct definition of the mental in terms of the introspectible suggests. If so, a more nuanced Cartesianism is called for. It is

nevertheless a great virtue of this book that it attempts to develop a responsible Cartesian philosophy of mind in the current intellectual climate. Moreover, one can safely predict that future attempts will build on the achievements of this one.