

SOLIPSISM A PSEUDO-PROBLEM

by D. R. Khashaba

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

First we have to be clear as to what we mean by solipsism. I distinguish three different senses of the term. (1) Only in a mental asylum can we meet with a person who believes that she or he is the only real thing in existence and that all the ‘persons’ and all the happenings she or he encounters in their waking hours are figments of their imagination and have no more substantiality than the similar images they see in their dreams. This extreme case will be implicitly answered in our answer to the other extreme case (2) which is a logical or epistemological conundrum: since everything I know, perceive, do, or suffer is part of my experience, how can I rationally justify my belief in the existence of things outside of and independent of my experience. This is the version that Bradley formulates succinctly at the beginning of chapter XXI of *Appearance and Reality*. In between these two extremes, one to be simply dismissed as an instance of insanity and the other to be explained away as a linguistic confusion, there is (3) a third true, harmless, and much needed sense of solipsism, and it is with this benign sense of solipsism that Wittgenstein is most concerned. In *Philosophical Investigations* he works it into the problem of Private Language. (See “The Other Wittgenstein” in *Plato’s Universe of Discourse*, 2015.) In this third special sense, solipsism is a necessary and inescapable consequence of our finite, limited, fragmented nature. It is clear from the statements cited from Wittgenstein above that he is thinking of our thought world, of the world as everyone of us experiences it, or rather the world as everyone of us has to make for oneself. For the world as it is in itself and by itself is utterly meaningless for us. We shape the world and make it what it is for us. This is the gist of Plato’s Forms and of Kant’s concepts of the Understanding (in Kant’s technical sense of the term).

[A] NOTES ON BRADLEY

Bradley states the case for logical solipsism simply and clearly: “I cannot transcend experience, and experience must be my experience. From this it follows that nothing beyond my self exists for what is experience is its states.” (Ch. XXI, p.164 electronic version.) As in any logical ‘proof’, as in every determinate formulation of thought, every key word in the statement hides a trap which, once brought out to the light loses its bite. ‘I’ as the cognizing subject am not part of the experience that presumably I cannot transcend. I as transcendent subject know that the objective world, that I perceive and transact with, including my body, is a world that I only partly comprehend and only partly manipulate and control. The subjective I – Kant’s transcendental unity of apperception – is neither in the world nor of the world. The physical I that is in the natural world is as much an object of the world as any other object in the world. Thus theoretical (logical) solipsism is a conundrum of ambiguity that is resolved as soon as we dispel the fog shrouding our common words. No serious thinker ever took the so-called problem of solipsism as more than a logical puzzle — what Bradley calls ‘thoughtless obscurity’.

Doubtless everyone of us lives in a world of his or her own. The most intimate friends talking about the ‘same’ thing necessarily talk about two different versions of the one thing, because the thought of the thing in each mind is necessarily qualified by unique experiences, associations and physical constitutions. Nevertheless, each knows that her or his thought is an interpretation of a common objective world. Let us call this one’s interpretive vision of the world; it is a pattern laid out on the objective world to give it a measure of intelligibility. Our scientific picture of the world, at any time from Babylonian astronomy to quantum mechanics, is all interpretation of an independent world. We apprehend without doubt that we ourselves are a part in a world that is not of our own making. But there is always a parallel world of our own making. To confuse the two worlds is a mark, if not of insanity, then at any rate of immaturity.

[B] NOTES ON WITTGENSTEIN

Wittgenstein's Propositions 5.63, 5.631 and 5.632 at first glance look hard to reconcile but I find them highly significant: When Wittgenstein says, "In fact what solipsism means, is quite correct, only it cannot be said, but it shows itself" he is clearly speaking of the "I" as subject, as pure subjectivity. This can never be encompassed in a formula of words, but fortunately we can communicate it in symbols, metaphors, gestures; otherwise human life would be impossible. But Wittgenstein confined himself (at least in the *Tractatus*) to logic and he rightly discovered that logic, pure and simple and in separation of everything else, says nothing. We conclude: solipsism in this sense is true, inescapable, and innocuous.

"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." (5.6) In one sense this is a truism. Every one of us is co-extensive with and limited to one's experience. Again, what the world means to us or what things in the world mean to us is strictly limited to each and everyone's conceptual system. I believe Kant would endorse this.

To my mind 5.61 is a corollary to 5.6 unless Wittgenstein has a hidden meaning of what logic means.

Bertrand Russell states in 1919 (in a private letter to Lady Ottoline Morell quoted by Michael Kremer in "To What Extent is Solipsism a Truth?") that he found Wittgenstein "has become a complete mystic". Wittgenstein had a marked mystic trait and had always been seeking the 'Truth' behind all empirical truths. When he found that all logic and all rigorously pure reasoning were strictly empty, saying nothing, he turned to "people like Kierkegaard and Angelus Silesius" (Russell, *ibid*). Yet when Wittgenstein says "In fact what solipsism *means*, is quite correct, only it cannot be *said*, but it *shows* itself" (5.62), he is completely transmuting the meaning of solipsism as commonly understood in philosophical discussion; he must have already been brooding the problems of private language and of other minds with which he busied himself in *Philosophical Investigations*,

Wittgenstein is the master of turning plain commonsense positions into unsolvable pseudoproblems. A subjective experience can neither be said nor shown because

its nature is to be the inwardness of an inward subjective insight. To objectify it is to negate it — the answer is not to solve or resolve it but to dissolve it, to cry with Hans Christian Andersen’s innocent child, “The Emperor has nothing on!”

It is a misuse of language to speak of the ‘truth’ of a subjective experience, mystic or otherwise. To objectify it is to change its nature. It is real to the agent, not ‘true’ except in a sense that deprives the word of the essential character of truth: to be true is to agree with an ‘other than itself’; what is real is real in itself and for itself. A lover can show his love to his beloved by a gesture, a word, a deed; but if those signs exhaust the fire in the lover’s inmost being, it is not love. That is why science is concerned with truth since its law is objectivity while philosophy is concerned with reality since its law is subjectivity.

Proposition 6.54 agrees with Plato’s dialectic which destroys the ground presuppositions of all philosophy (*Republic*, 533c). We reach the philosophical goal not when we arrive at a certain correct position, but when in dialectically destroying the grounds of our position, we exercise intelligent creativity, the only final reality. Wittgenstein glanced this but his hold on it was precarious, not firm or clear enough. Wittgenstein’s view of philosophy as “not a theory but an activity” is fully in harmony with what I have been saying and with Plato’s view of philosophy as philosophizing.

To speak of “ineffable quasi-facts” is to go complexly astray. The metaphysical ineffable, far from being a pitiable sickly quasi-fact, is a lively living reality. Its ineffability is not a defect but is the consequence of the divine transcendence of all limiting determinateness, a consequence of the eternity of its creativity. It is a reality that cannot exist but gives birth to multifarious existences (existents); it is the failure to grasp the elusive nature of metaphysical reality that has led scholars to their interminable interpretations and counter-interpretations.

And Wittgenstein’s insistence that the purpose of philosophy is to make propositions clear (4.112) is fully in agreement with the Platonic understanding of philosophy as endless perpetual probing for understanding of our inner reality, strictly as inexhaustible as it is ineffable.

The metaphysical ineffable is of the essence of the subjectivity of the subject. It is the innermost holy of holies that admits no god but the sacred *eimi* ('I am') that never exists but is the progenitor of all existents; it is the transcendental unity of apperception that Kant laboured in vain to define, that Gilbert Ryle banned because it is uncatchable. Wittgenstein sensed all this but being too much in the clutch of the Empiricist creed that suffused the early twentieth century thinking – Frege, Russell, G. E. Moore, Carnap, Ayer – he could not grasp the idea of a reality that is – like Plato's Form of the Good – beyond thought and beyond existence, yet gives birth to all thought and all existence.

[C] CONCLUSION

Thus the so-called problem of solipsism turns out to be not one but three distinct problems: the first is for the psychiatrist to deal with; the second innocuous version is a consequence of our unique individuality; the third is semantic, all it requires is a Socratic examination of our ideas. A genuine philosophical problem does not call for a solution but for ever-renewed exploration of the mystery of reality. A theoretical problem that calls for a solution invariably turns out to be a linguistic riddle that vanishes as soon as all the terms involved are clearly distinguished. (It is obvious that throughout we have been concerned with theoretical problems. The practical problems of life and the problems of empirical science are of course a completely distinct matter.)

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