

## **Is there any aspect to the solipsist theory that you consider to be worth saving?**

Amongst the many topics of philosophy that have caused and still cause much debate and argument, the issues of consciousness and the subjective nature of our experience are particularly controversial. In this essay I will propose that, while solipsism consists of an extreme view of reality, a view generally considered unacceptable by philosophers, an aspect of solipsism could be put to use in tackling these issues. Of course subjective consciousness is a notoriously complex issue, but if it is the job of philosophers to think the unthinkable, then let us think about how solipsism could come to our aid. With such a broad subject I can here only sketch out my thoughts and offer suggestions about a possible way forward.

The solipsist theory holds that reality, that is all that exists, is purely subjective, just "me and my experience". For a solipsist, "this world is my world". This view derives from the fact that any knowledge that can be attained must be acquired through one's consciousness. The position of idealism holds that reality is wholly in the perceptions of our mind, but the realisation and acceptance of the existence of an external world is sufficient to temper that position. However, if the idealist view is taken to its extreme, then all that exists must be entirely and solely a product of my own mind. If nothing exists apart from myself, and that self is removed, then nothing exists. This is an extreme view, and one that most thinkers would reject. But regardless of the intuitive difficulties with solipsism, I intend to argue that an aspect of it can be usefully retained.

Let us accept that there may be an infinite number of possible worlds each existing as a result of different properties, possibilities or choices of outcome. However there is one of these worlds in particular, the one in which we say we are currently existing, that has all

the properties, features and stuff that we recognise on a continuous basis, this I refer to as the actual world. Let us say that  $W$  is the actual world in which I exist and has the form that I recognise on a continuous basis, while  $W^*$  is a possible world in which I do not exist on that basis. Now, to try to imagine a world  $W^*$  in which I do not exist, or perhaps exist in some alternative situation, I find very difficult to do; how can I even start to think of such a world? This suggests that there is something about the actual world  $W$  that is quite different from  $W^*$ . Furthermore, in my world  $W$ , I am clearly aware that there is a great deal of knowledge that I do not have, nor am I likely to have. For example, there is much on our planet that I am unlikely to be able to know, and I am even less likely to know things about the distant universe. So while I find  $W^*$  impossible to imagine, I feel epistemologically weak about the world  $W$  itself, and impossibly so for places beyond my immediate environment.

Both  $W$  and  $W^*$  seem outside my security of knowledge, but on further reflection there is an aspect of the actual world  $W$  that does hold certainty for me (and a reason why I cannot imagine  $W^*$ ). This is my awareness of my own subjective world, which I will call world  $S$ . Here I am certain that all people in  $S$  are known or knowable to me because I either know them already or am able to find out about them. In addition all substances and properties are known or knowable by me because I either know them already or I can find out about them if I carry out the necessary investigation. This is quite different from my knowledge of world  $W^*$  or even of world  $W$ . But there is another interesting feature of  $S$ : it did not exist before my coming into being, and it will not exist when I cease to be. This world is my world.

Thus I know for certain that  $S$  exists and even if I am deluded by an malicious demon I still know this to be true because its very existence is due to my subjective awareness, and I know for certain that it will cease on my own ceasing to be, no matter that anyone tries to delude me. Now, although I am absolutely certain of  $S$ , I am not so certain about the possibility of other subjective worlds in  $W$  (let these worlds be called  $S^*$ ). But reflecting on

this and not holding strong solipsist views, I can recognise the possibility of S\*. If we allow this to be the case, then each S\* will be created and destroyed by the coming to be and ceasing to be of its particular 'I'. This subjective being I am going to call the 'necessary observer'.

Why do I want to introduce the term 'necessary observer'? Firstly, 'necessary' because no world S or S\* could exist without the existence of that particular subjective consciousness. Each S\* world is necessitated by that existence. Secondly, 'observer' because a conscious being must be the observer of the world S\* in order for it to exist. The word emphasises the involuntary nature of the subjective experience. This does not involve the will: the observer does not choose what to experience as a result of her subjectivity; observing is a passive activity. The world S exists because of the existence of the necessary observer, but it is not created by it. We are not wizards who consciously make or will things to happen. Why else do things happen contrary to my will or benefit? Thus S exists as the specific world intrinsic to my conscious being, and I can only observe this world. Whereas things that can and do occur in my world are *occurring* in the actual world, their *existence* as a subjective experience in world S is entirely by my own being. Thus the term 'necessary observer' also emphasises its reflexive nature: for the world S\* to exist, there must exist a specific conscious being who acts as observer of this world. Compare this situation to a thought experiment for example. In such an experiment, one's imagination is able to analyse the scenario of a fictitious world in order to examine its properties. A conscious observer is not necessary within such a world for it to be investigated and analyzed. However, for a world S\* to exist it must necessarily be observed by its conscious observer.

I therefore argue that parts of a solipsistic theory should be retained in order to account for the peculiarly subjective nature of the world as we perceive it. However, unlike pure solipsism I will allow that the external world contains other conscious beings for whom their

own world  $S^*$  exists and for which they are the necessary observers. If this is the case then the actual world  $W$  must contain many other worlds  $S^*$ , all being subsets of the actual world  $W$ . But each of the subjective worlds is different from the actual world because for each necessary observer their world is entirely their own. The actual world  $W$  can never be the world that I myself fully inhabit.  $W$  is some compilation of my world  $S$  together with the many other  $S^*$  worlds. The world I call the actual world, that which I recognise on a continuous basis, is no more than my  $S$  world, and since my  $S$  world appears to me complete and knowable, unlike the actual world, it seems to me that the actual world is not real at all, but reality actually consists in an aggregation of all possible  $S^*$  worlds.

I have sketched out the view that there is some part of the solipsist theory that can be put to use. I realise that materialists will have many objections to this sketch, but surely the solipsist idea that the  $S$  world and everything in it, is actually my own specific world and provides an explanation for our peculiar experience of subjectivity. This subjective world seems far more real than some objective 'actual world'. Indeed the view that there is really something called 'an actual world' would seem very dubious given that it can never wholly be experienced by a single conscious being. Rather each conscious being is a necessary observer who through their subjective consciousness causes their own unique world to exist. Perhaps the necessity for a world to exist gives us some reason for existence ourselves. What am I? - the necessary observer of my world; why am I? - in order for my world to exist. This world is my world.