

## Is it possible to refute solipsism?

"As against solipsism it is to be said, in the first place, that it is psychologically impossible to believe, and is rejected in fact even by those who mean to accept it. I once received a letter from an eminent logician, Mrs. [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christine\\_Ladd-Franklin" \o "Christine Ladd-Franklin"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christine_Ladd-Franklin)Christine Ladd-Franklin, saying that she was a solipsist, and was surprised that there were no others. Coming from a logician and a solipsist, her surprise surprised me." Bertrand Russell

Solipsism, Descartes' first axiom taken to absurdity, is the philosophical idea that the only thing one can be sure of is the existence of one's *own* mind. *Existence*, for the solipsist, means *my* existence and that of *my* mental states. Ranging from strongest to weakest, there are three main branches of this stance: 1. Metaphysical - only the self exists and everything else, externally, is a projection of that self, 2. Epistemological - only the mind of the solipsist can be known and thus studies of the external world are futile, and 3. Methodological - the acceptance that only certain known facts about one's own mind can be used to make inferences about the external world.

There are, and have been, various attempts to fully refute solipsism, and even some suggestions that it is indeed a self-refuting idea (why would a solipsist even bother to state that they were a solipsist? They could indeed be simply trying to inject some entertainment into what is an inherently boring existence, but our solipsist could also respond by saying that the 'agent' to whom the statement was made, although a projection, wouldn't be convinced of this), but as yet philosophy has generated no conclusive disproof of solipsism and so for the time being, and possibly for the rest of time, we have to reluctantly accept it as a logically possible philosophical idea.

Taking aim at different parts of solipsism, philosophical responses to it come in various shapes and sizes, with varying degrees of non-success in relation to debunking it; Wittgenstein's *Private Language Argument*, general comments of a degrading nature towards it, such as:

"solipsism is entirely empty and without content. Like a 'faith' argument it seems *sterile*, *i.e.*, allows no further argument, nor can it be falsified." Bertrand Russell,

and a whole host of arguments that run along *realist* lines of the deeply unsettling and improbable nature of solipsism. Not forgetting the idea that Solipsism equates with realism, where the realist's *universe* is equated with the solipsist's *unconscious*.

### Solipsism and Wittgenstein's *Private Language Argument*

If we consider that the solipsist regards the word 'pain' to mean 'my pain' and cannot understand it in any other way we can see an opening to explore Wittgenstein's *Private Language Argument*. He says there's no such thing as a language that is both meaningful and understandable by one person but which is impossible for any other person to understand. **In *Philosophical Investigations* he says that language is used in a variety of ways and that in each way it must follow certain rules; each, he says, is a different kind of language game, played by its own rules. This created a new way to look at the meaning of words, that meaning is not empirical but comes from how the word is used. His 'Beetle in Box' analogy is apt here. We cannot see what is in each others' box, only what is in our one, but we 'agree' to use the word 'beetle' to describe it.** Ignoring why our solipsist has decided to communicate with a projection of his or her own mind, we can go on to say that it is incoherent in such that the solipsist's use of language needs to be externally validated and consistency confirmed,

it needs to follow *rules*. But our solipsist, fearing disproof, will not reach for external rules or logic.

Unfortunately, this is not a refutation of solipsism. Our solipsist has a few ways respond: that there exists external ordered rules is not denied, only the existence of other minds (epistemological), and that the reaching of these external rules is the reaching for rules the solipsist itself created (metaphysical). The metaphysical solipsist could also respond by saying that he or she created the language and its rules, however inconsistent or imperfect.

### **Solipsism and inferring the existence of Other Minds**

Austrian **neurologist** [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sigmund\\_Freud"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sigmund_Freud) \o "Sigmund Freud"**Sigmund Freud** stated that other minds are not known, but only inferred to exist: *"Consciousness makes each of us aware only of his own states of mind, that other people, too, possess a consciousness is an inference which we draw by analogy from their observable utterances and actions, in order to make this behaviour of theirs intelligible to us."*

'I think, therefore I am', Descartes' first axiom. How can it be that that the people you pass in the street, sit next to the metro, talk with over dinner, exhibit so convincingly the suggestion of having *minds* yet we cannot be sure? In hundreds of situations we can *see*, reflected in their movements and expressions and behaviour that they behave logically like we do and so we can infer that indeed there must be consciousness, there must be a mind in control. An example being that if I'm frustrated due to failing to solve problem I behave in a certain way: I frown, I shout, I appear disgruntled. In observing someone else in this situation, I can only see two of these three stages: I see that they are doing a puzzle and I see that because they are struggling to solve it they are expressing 'frustration', like I would do. From this, I infer that consciousness links these two things. Again, though, we are left literally frustrated by this argument's failure to fully refute solipsism. If we accept Cartesian consciousness, then we must also accept that there's not necessarily a connection between the mind and the body. With this, the argument from analogy crumbles. The mind, theoretically, could be housed in a body very different from the human body and thus any bodily actions that seem to be connected to a mental thought are merely incidental.

### **Solipsism and the inability to external things**

The layman may say to the metaphysical solipsist "Why, if the world is the sole creation of your mind, don't you have the most pleasant life possible? Why don't you alter the world to suit you? Why do you accept the existence of pain?" And so on. Here the solipsist has a few ways out: 1. he or she could say that the external world is a subconscious creation over which control cannot be exerted, 2. that the way things are, the imperfections, are on purpose designed to make life more interesting, or finally, even more infuriating: 3. that they simply don't remember/don't know.

### **Scum of the Earth**

*"...same quasi-schizophrenic logics: a closed system, perfectly sound and logical in itself, waterproof against reality; inattackable because all arguments fly off at a tangent. Perhaps deepest cause of Socialists' failure [is] that they tried to conquer the world by reason. "*

This is from Arthur Koestler's *Scum of the Earth*, where he is remarking on a fellow prisoner's - who happens to be of Koestler's former creed - defence on the Hitler-Stalin pact. It struck me as almost uncannily like something one would say about a solipsist. The solipsist, like the communist, will find a way out of any

refutation.