

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

I am all that exists right now in my world. My mind is all I can inhabit. The only place I can be is in myself now. Everything around me is mine to view and interpret however I choose. This is how it often was as a child and continues to be but for the apparent reality of others and my experience of navigating it, which has become an all-consuming necessary illusion perpetrated by adulthood. But there are episodes in adulthood; in times of disassociation, perhaps through trauma, drug use, loneliness; or in apparently random, non-externally induced, existentially detached viewings of the madly rushing screen of persons and events before me when I enter solipsism. It is then that I may glimpse the solipsistic truth: I am on my own with myself and my world is all.

When I am able to really concentrate on the crude fact that all there is: is me, then I realise it to be a possibility at least. My now is all there is can be a powerful sentiment. Eckhart Toll, in 'The Power of Now', makes a fine fist of such a view. With nods to the reality of our temporal existence, he does not disregard others but makes a powerful case for focusing more on being in the moment. This simple but effective proposition is very appealing to masses of people living lives tortured by past issues and the anxiety of future problems. With concentration on yourself, solipsism is not only a place to be but a consoling way of viewing the reality before us, solving the desperate plight of caring about how others might view us while satisfying a need to just be.

There is clearly a big problem with solipsism in that common sense completely rejects a solipsistic concept of existence. We find ourselves negotiating a complex physical world and even more complex human interactional world. Far from being isolated selves we are constantly in relation with other thinking beings. We are able to empathise with and share in the experience of others. Share in the commonality of human experience. So to can we reflect on our differences to make sense of our lives. Much of our expression and appreciation of culture is a shared examination of living, even if that may be an expression of the difficulty in living.

More rationally, perhaps like scepticism, solipsism is self-refuting. It cannot be something, without being contrasted with the swathe of experience that makes for humanity in all its glory. The self-refuting theory of solipsism is

the most logical and damaging argument, in that for solipsism to be credible, it must engage with language and meaning, which is an interaction with the world outside itself. Our language does not come from an independent self but is gathered from our experience with others. Where might solipsism begin?

As we develop from a new born life into adulthood, at what point do we realise a solipsistic attitude? A new born baby simply has no self as far as we can tell. We are hopefully nurtured into existing in our current world. It might be argued that we are born blank slates and moulded into a functioning member of society, that we are socialised and constructed completely by the society we live in, and where this goes wrong, we have unstable persons who we can label with mental health conditions such as psychopathy or on a spectrum of autism or Asperger's. In the sense that these individuals deny conditioning, it is then they who are closest to solipsism. Then again, if it were that we are merely conditioned, then how are we able to take a view that we are individual free thinkers who can be aware of the social conditioning and so take a viewpoint that is solipsistic? Both socialization and genetic reasoning for human behaviour suggest the self is denied in some way and neither negates or proves solipsistic being. Solipsism may not be falsifiable in this way.

If not falsifiable, it seems highly probable that we just reject crude solipsism at this stage, as all the evidence suggests we are operating in a world with others, as a species that has evolved over millions of years to inhabit this earth now, and for some 'time' to come. Our sense of being together with others is universally accepted, from what I can gather, leaving solipsism as another interesting thought experiment provided by philosophy.

So what is there left of solipsism? Quite a lot I would suggest. Since Descartes positioned much of modern thinking around the fundamental existence of the self we have been on a journey to discover ourselves. In the absence of God, as indicated by Marx and Nietzsche and others, we are left with trying to discover who we are as the ultimate project. In Nietzsche's case, it is our will to power that has become pre-eminent – a task that can only be taken on by our self. Freud takes us further into the realm of examining what makes our self and how it can be affected.

The vast industry of self-help tries to sustain this quest for self-realisation, tooling us up for the mission to be the best person we can be. Whether that

is career/business success or running ultra-marathons, the perfect diet, the perfect body, cheating death by any means; or yoga, meditation, balancing emotion, accepting our lot, transcending the straight-jacket of our lived experience – oneness. What is mindfulness if not an attempt to achieve a solipsistic position? And this is where everyone is – swimming around attempting to be someone, or who we really are. At the same time, that self is elusive. No matter how hard I try, I can't find myself – I'm not there. So we will just have to create ourselves instead.

In creating AI, are we not saying that we are simply programmed individuals who are essentially without a self, or that self is manufactured? That we are nothing more than a functioning machine, with nothing of the self, other than the material interaction of chemicals? We are nothing but programmed individuals created by the intelligent beings we are on the cusp of creating? More than this perhaps is the recoding of our genetic material to create different, 'better' beings without the defects that natural mutation struggles to eliminate since nature requires sufficient difference to allow for radical mutation should the environment require it. So we have been created by something else and no selves exist but the creator, even if that creator is nature, or scientists in a lab, or evil demons, or god. Then we are nobody. In which case, solipsism at least tells us we are somebody. Solipsism tells me I can I think for myself, even if I can't know others and knowing others may not be easy but critical to ultimately denying solipsism should we so desire.

My partner is very sceptical of my crudely expressed philosophical endeavours: 'Of course things exist'. (I feel almost foolish in trying to be a good teacher of philosophy). And so it was with my definition of solipsism as a view that the self is all we can know of, and our experience is a self-interpretation of illusory things out there. Having suffered the same look, somewhere between incredulity and questioning my sanity, I simply deferred to common sense. But not long after, my partner talked of a current mode of thinking they'd discovered from a friend about using 'manifestation' as a strategy to realise ones desires. So if you think positively about a desired outcome it can directly affect it to happen. Well, there we are. Having found solipsism to be incredulous we are now using the mind to change our world. So my world is an interesting place where strange things occur all the time. Finding truths is nigh impossible.

I can't be sure of anything really and so I go along with my own and others confident assurances, which on closer examination are usually contradictory.

I can totally reject solipsism on logical grounds and at best admire the academic position of accepting it to be unfalsifiable. Why is it then that we constantly dip into solipsism as an effective and healthy way of viewing this world? There is something about solipsism that is deeply natural in us I am now thinking. (When I say us, I of course mean me).

**Terence Neal**