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## Solipsism, language, and logic

### Abstract

In this paper on solipsism, its author argues that this philosophy is at odds with the fundamental facts concerning the use of language by people, which demonstrates that the idea of private language cannot be defended. Perhaps the most conclusive arguments against solipsism stem from metamathematical theorems asserting the incompleteness of arithmetic and the undefinability of truth.

### Keywords

private language, ordinary language, semantics, metamathematics, intuitionism

Here is a popular characterization of solipsism (Blackburn 1994: 356):

The belief that only oneself and one's experience exists. Solipsism is the extreme consequence of believing that knowledge must be founded

on inner, personal, states of experience, and then failing to find a bridge whereby they can inform us to of anything beyond themselves. Solipsism at the present moment extends its skepticism even to one's own past states, so that all that is left is me, now.

Unfortunately, the above description of solipsism is not entirely transparent. First of all, I see no logical passing from:

(1) believing that knowledge must be founded on inner, personal states of experience of the statement;

(2) only oneself and one's experience exist.

Clearly, if we supplement (1) by

(3), personal states of experience cannot inform us to of anything beyond themselves,

(2) can be derived from (1), and (3). Yet the extension reported by Blackburn; that is,

(4) only oneself at now and one's now-experience exist,

is not easily comparable with (2). At first look, (2) implies (4), but the converse entailment does not hold. Thus, (2) is stronger than (4). This means that if (4) is refuted, the same automatically concerns (2). However, this account is too simple. What does it mean to refute solipsism? According to the prevailing view, the issue does not consist in defending (2) against (4), but in demonstrating that solipsism is wrong at all. Consequently, if we say that (4) is wrong, because we should not exclude one's own past states as experientially legitimate, (2) still can be defended, even if (4) is rejected. In this sense, (2) and (4) are somehow independent, but mutually related.

Solipsism is frequently considered to be completely absurd. This stance was taken by Bertrand Russell in a famous passage (Russell 1948: 180):

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. Christine Ladd-Franklin, saying that she was a solipsist, and was surprised that there were no others. Coming from a logician, this surprised me. The fact that I cannot believe something does not prove that it is false, but it does prove that I am insincere and frivolous if I pretend to believe it.

Ladd-Franklin was a logician (perhaps not as eminent as Russell supposed, and perhaps he considered her as such to some extent in an ironic way), but still notable. She obtained a doctorate on the base of her dissertation *On the Algebra of Logic* (which will soon be reprinted by College Publications, London), defended in 1882 at the Johns Hopkins University, where Charles S. Peirce served as the advisor. Russell tried to reduce Ladd-Franklin's position *ad absurdum*. He could add that she should not have any difficulty in convincing his as her construction that he is nothing more than her own experience. In any case, a solipsist writing a letter to his or her own private own experiences seems to be very strange enterprise. On the other hand, being strange or ridiculous does not mean the same as being inconsistent. Thus, although my own experiences speak to me that I am strange, this circumstance is not at odds with the coherence of myself. The solipsist can say (to himself or herself): "Well, that allows me to say that solipsism is acceptable." It is interesting what she, as a devoted egoist ("egoism was an earlier label for solipsism"), would say upon being informed about the reprinting of her work almost 140 years later.

Ludwig Wittgenstein considered solipsism as a serious philosophical view. In his *Tractatus*, he writes (Witgenstein 1922, references to the 1961 edition):

5.6 *The limits of language* mean the limits of my world.

5.61 Logic pervades the world; the limits of the world are also its limits.

So we cannot say in logic, 'The world has this in it, and this, but not that.' For that would appear to presuppose that we were excluding certain possibilities, and this

cannot be the case, since it would require that logic should go beyond the limits of the world; for only in that way we could view those limits from the other side as well.

We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot *say* either.

5.62 This remark provides the key to the problem, how much truth there is in solipsism.

For what the solipsist *means* is quite correct; only that cannot be *said*, but makes it itself manifest.

The world is *my* world: this is manifest in the fact that *limits* of language (of that language which alone I understand) mean the limits of *my* world.

[...]

5.632 The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world.

[...]

5.64 [...] solipsism, its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism.

The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains no reality co-ordinated with it.

5.641 [...] The philosophical self is not the human being, not the human body, or the human soul with which psychology deals, but rather the metaphysical subject. The limit of the world – not a part of it.

I will follow the interpretation of the quoted fragments suggested in Stenius 1960: 220–222 (see also: Glock 1996: 348–352). The passage 5.641 appears to be crucial at this point. The metaphysical subject can be considered to be transcendental in the Kantian sense. Witt-

genstein's theses about *my* world, the limits of language, the limits of the world, manifesting, saying, etc. become coherent, although there are still problems with the subject as the limit of the world, pure realism (what is it?), or the self as shrinking to a point without extension. In any case, Wittgenstein's view, which can be described as transcendental solipsism (this was proposed in Glock 1996: 350), makes it understandable in what sense the world is "inside" the subject, because *my* language as an internal entity in the transcendental subject determines the limits of *my* world.

Additionally, since Wittgenstein rejected the language/metalinguage distinction, the transcendental subject cannot say anything meaningful about Itself; this explains why we have to deal with manifesting or showing. Let me add that 5.61 is somehow trivial if logic is conceived as first-order (I do not claim that Wittgenstein reduced logic to first-order system). According to a metalogical theorem, logic as such does not distinguish any extralogical content and, for this reason, we cannot say in logic that the world has this and this in it, but not that. Taking into account the above explanations, Wittgenstein's solipsism, although impressive as a metaphysical construction, has almost (I will omit a closer analysis of this qualification) nothing to do with solipsism as accounted by (2) or (4).

Wittgenstein rejected the main theses of *Tractatus* in his later philosophy. In particular, he based his criticism of solipsism on the private language argument. Roughly speaking, the argument in question posits that a private language is impossible (see Wittgenstein 1953: §§ 242–315), because using a language presupposes (grammatical) rules that follow, but the individual cannot do that without social practices. He writes in *Philosophical Investigations*:

§ 243. A human being can encourage himself, give himself orders, obey, blame and punish himself. We could even imagine human beings who spoke only in monologue; who accompanied their activities by taking to themselves. An explorer who watched them and listened to their talk

might succeed in translating their languages into ours. (This would enable him to predict these people's actions correctly, for he also bears them making resolutions and decisions).

But could we also imagine a language in which a person could write down or give vocal expression to his inner experiences – his feeling, moods, and the rest – for his private use? – Well, can't we do so in our ordinary language? – But that is not what I mean. The individual words of this language are to refer to what can refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language.

§ 244. How do words *refer* to sensations? – There doesn't seem to be any problem here; don't we talk about sensations every day, and give them names? But how is the connexion between the name and the thing named set up? This question is the same as how does a human being learn to meaning of the names of sensations? – of the word "pain for example." Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural expressions or the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behavior. "So you are saying that that the word 'pain' really means crying?" – On the contrary: the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it.

Disregarding many controversial issues concerning the private-language argument (see Candlish, Wrisley 1996; Glock 1996: 309–313 for overviews), let me immediately go to its relation to solipsism. Clearly, this view (even in its transcendental version) must consider the language used by the egoistic subject as private. Now, if a private language is impossible, the solipsist could not have linguistic resources to articulate his or her philosophical statements. Consider the situation of Ladd-Franklin once again from Wittgenstein's (later) perspective. Perhaps Russell should be more surprised that she wrote a letter to him using ordinary parlance than that she wrote to him

at all. In other words, even if the solipsist is so clever to write a book on his or her own theory under the circumstances that nobody, except himself or herself, could read it, this job had to be done in a language that is (partially) inaccessible even for other, if any, solipsists.

Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz was another philosopher who contributed to the issue of the privacy of our cognitive enterprises (see Ajdukiewicz 1962). He was not so much interested in the problem of private language, but he analyzed the question of the intesubjectivity of our subjective experience. Guided by his general metaphilosophical standpoint, Ajdukiewicz considered not sensations, but rather sentences about them. Such sentences are private (although Ajdukiewicz did not use this qualification, it is convenient in the present context) in the sense that they are always motivated by one's sensations in a definite moment. How do people assert private sentences about own experiences? According to Ajdukiewicz, they tacitly use so-called empirical directives of sense. Such rules require assertions of sentences in suitable empirical situations. Considered the sentence:

(5) this apple is red,

uttered by a person *P*. This subject asserts (5) provided that he or she has a sensation of redness of the apple in question. However, *P* must understand in advance all constituents of (5), that is, "this," "apple," "is" and "red." "In advance" means here that the meaning of these words is prior to every concrete utterance of the sentence in question. In general, meanings of expressions contribute to empirical directives of sense. Assume now that (5) is uttered by *P* is heard by the person *P'*. If *P'* has the sensation of redness of the same apple, he or she will agree with *P* and assert (5), even if related experiences of both these subjects differ to some extent. Moreover, suitable directives can be used to explain, if necessary, why, for example, *P* asserts (5) but *P'* – rejects this sentence.

We can express the situation described above in other words. *P* and *P'* share the same (or sufficiently similar) linguistic competence. Their sensations are private and also not repeatable, but, due to common

linguistic resources, they can become intersubjective. Now, (5) can be understood as a sentence-type or a sentence-token. The sense directives primarily concern types, and secondarily tokens. This fact is responsible for the notorious situation that private sentences have the public character as instances of types. Thus, the publicity of types determines the publicity of tokens. Before deriving consequences of Ajdukiewicz's presented analysis for the problem of solipsism, I briefly outline Gilbert Ryle's analysis of the word "ordinary" as related to the concept of ordinary language. He observes that the adjective "ordinary" in the phrase "the ordinary use of expressions" means something different than "ordinary" in the context "the use of ordinary expressions." The latter refers to various linguistic customs, being local or global, etc. Such phenomena are empirically registered, described, compared, and sometimes explained by grammarians intending to find linguistic generalities. Ryle points out that "ordinary" in the first phrase can be replaced by "standard." Hence, the expressions of non-ordinary, usually technical (for instance, mathematical, logical, physical, etc.) language have their standard use, although they are typically outside of ordinary, that is colloquial language. For instance, the words "derivative" and "integral" have the standard mathematical use. The same concerns colloquial expressions, like "I see," "I think," etc., although the criteria of being standard are frequently vague. Ryle's central thesis is that "standard" and "correct" are equivalent. Combining Ajdukiewicz and Ryle, we can say that the sense-directives pertain to the standard use of expressions. In particular, respecting the ordinary use of expressions is very important for philosophy.

Supplemented by Ryle's remarks, Ajdukiewicz's approach allows us to analyze solipsism in a more sophisticated way than Wittgenstein's observations related to the private language argument. Consider (4). The word "now" is crucial; it is an indexical linguistic item. Problems with its function of "now" as referring to the boundary between the past and the future are well-known and can be



omitted here. Let us assume that the now-solipsist is puzzled by (4) and tries to explain to his or her own self the meaning of “now.” Although I do not feel competent to speak for the solipsist, I see no chances to perform a satisfactory solipsist analysis of momentary sensations, because the concepts of the past and the future must be assumed. In Ryle’s terminology, in order to analyze (4) we need the standard use of “now.” For instance, the now-solipsist can recognize, let us say, a difference between “now( $t_1$ )” and “now( $t_2$ ),” but will (I guess) have difficulties with answering, which indexed “now” is the true about the actual now. In other words, the now-solipsist needs a public language in order account for the meaning of “now,” but he or she has nothing to be used in this role. The above argument can be generalized to (2). Let us assume that the (2)-solipsist  $P$  is informed by one of own sensations (there is no other possibility on this view) that there is a deep difference between veridical and non-veridical perceptions (hallucinations, delusions, illusions, dreams, etc.), and that  $P$ , inspired by the “sensational” information, is interested in the content of one’s own experiences, in particular dreams (if any). There two possibilities: (a)  $P$  has dreams and sees a difference between them and other experiences; (b)  $P$  does not see any difference between dreams and non-dreams. However,  $P$  will (probably, let me add) encounters serious difficulties with reporting his own experiences. In the case of (a),  $P$  cannot articulate the related difference in the (our) standard way. Of course,  $P$  can say that some sensations are more compact than others, and even the word “dream” has been invented for the latter, but the standard difference between veridical and non-veridical perceptions appears not accessible to him or her. The case (b) is still more exotic: all  $P$ ’s sensations are equivalently real (in  $P$ ’s sense). One could remark that the above analysis has been made from the perspective which is external from the point of view of solipsism. That is correct, but our metalanguage is sufficiently rich to express the difference between the solipsist, defined by (2) or by (4) and the “normal” subject.

However, the solipsist cannot make his or her position intelligible –  $P$ 's own metalanguage has is not embeddable in our own, but  $P$  rejects ours. The reason is that the solipsist has to reject the difference between private and public linguistic resources. It seems that early Wittgenstein was right: transcendental solipsism is the only way out for solipsism. However, due to its transcendentalism, this view is remote from the standard egoism.

Solipsism can also be considered to be the extreme form of subjective idealism, expressed by Berkeley's famous equality:

(6) *esse = percipi*,

that is, to be (exist) means to be perceived. In other words, the existence of  $a$  is defined as being perceived by someone (I neglect a possible difference between "normal" Berkeleyan subjective idealism and now-subjective idealism; the later is equivalent with now-solipsism). Ajdukiewicz formulated an ingenious argument against (6) (see Ajdukiewicz 1948; Woleński 2019: 315–320 for a generalization). It is easily to apply this reasoning to solipsism. Let  $S$  be the solipsist subject. Consequently,  $S$  possesses some knowledge  $\mathbf{K}$ . Let us assume that  $\mathbf{K}$  includes the arithmetic of natural numbers ( $\mathbf{AR}$ ).  $S$  needs to prove that  $\mathbf{K}$  is consistent in order to justify its own soundness. This means that the sentence

(7)  $\mathbf{Ar}$  is consistent,

should be provable in  $\mathbf{K}$ . However, according to the second Gödel incompleteness theorem, (7) cannot be proved in  $\mathbf{K}$  by means accessible in  $S$ -knowledge. In fact, (7) is one on undecidable arithmetical statements in the sense of Gödel's first incompleteness theorem. Let us assume that (7) is true. Thus, we have one true but undecidable element of  $S$ -knowledge. The solipsist can still argue that he or she has no reason to be puzzled, because truth of (7) is "egoistically" recognized "inside"  $S$ .

Ajdukiewicz offers a stronger argument, which can be adapted against solipsism. He interprets *esse* as a semantic category (that is, directed to objects), but *percipi* as a syntactic notion. This lat-

ter reading was motivated by the fact that the solipsist proposes the definition of *esse* by *percipi*. Consequently, the egoist tries to define semantics in syntactic terms. However, due to Tarski's theorem on the undefinability of truth (the set of arithmetical truth cannot be defined in arithmetic), this is impossible. Thus, the set of **K**-truths is not definable in **K** itself. A philosophical interpretation of this statement can be as follows. Identify *S* with **K**. Define **K** by enumeration or by a condition; for example,  $A \in \mathbf{K}$  if and only if *A* is accepted by *S*. Suppose that **K** is consistent. So **K** has (by the completeness theorem) a model **M**. However, **M** is (according to Tarski's theorem) not definable in terms of **K**. This means that **M** transcends **K** – the expressive power of the latter does not suffice to characterize the former. In other words (philosophical, but related to metalogical results), if we take **K** as expressing the cognitive content of *S* contained in *S*-thoughts, the object of knowledge cannot be identified with *percipi* of the knowing subject. Note that this conclusion is entirely independent of the ontological status of **M**. One could say that the outlined argument supports epistemological realism against solipsism (and subjective idealism). The question of the ontological (metaphysical) nature of items being known constitutes a spate issue.

Finally, let me observe that I have used classical logic. Some intuitionists propose the Creative Subject (**CS**) as *S* for mathematics. According to this view, mathematical proofs are carried out inside **CS** by use of intuitionistic logic. This approach is frequently related to Kant's transcendentalism and a kind of solipsism (see van Stigt 1990: 171–182 for an analysis in the philosophical context), although intuitionists stress that mathematics is intersubjective. Thus, we have some affinity with Wittgenstein's transcendental solipsism. Is Ajdukiewicz's argument applicable to this brand of egoism? The Heyting arithmetic (the intuitionistic theory of natural numbers) is subjected to Gödel's incompleteness theorems.

On the other hand, the intuitionistic solipsist rejects Tarski's theorem as based on the semantic definition of truth. On the other hand, the metamathematics employed by the intuitionist is not purely intuitionistic. Loosely speaking, the rejection of the classical position in the foundations of mathematics proceeds via the use of the resources of standard classical logic. Thus, the victory of the egoist in the intuitionistic dressing is Pyrrhonian, because he or she is either forced to be silent at the crucial point's or trait's own principles. This conclusion allows to say that (2) is refuted, at least from the internal point of view. It should be noted, however, that no criticism of solipsism is possible from the internal point of view; that is, solipsism itself.

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