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# Solipsism and ethics[1]

**Abstract**

The paper distinguishes two ways in which solipsism (in the ontological or epistemic sense) can be linked with ethics. The first one is connected with the question: What would ethical duties look like if solipsism in the ontological or epistemic sense were true?, whereas the second with the question: To what ethical phenomena may one legitimately refer the word "solipsism" in such a way that it would satisfy the following two conditions: it would retain some trace of its ontological sense and at the same time entail negative ethical evaluation? In response to the first question, some thought experiments are proposed in the paper. As for the second question, several different phenomena are distinguished that seem to satisfy both conditions, viz. radical/extreme narcissism, radical/extreme egoism (in Marquise de Sade's or Max Stirner's sense), and cognitively-based (egocentric) egoism.

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**Keywords**

ontological solipsism, epistemic solipsism, egoism, egotism, egocentrism, narcissism, ethical solipsism

In this essay we shall distinguish two ways in which solipsism – in either of its two main versions: ontological (only "I" exist) or epistemic (only "my" own Ego/mind can be known by "me") – can be linked with ethics. The first way is connected with the following question: what would ethical duties look like if solipsism in the ontological or epistemic sense were true? We shall try to answer this question by conducting some thought experiments. The second way is connected with the question about the existence of ethical phenomena to which one may legitimately refer the term "ethical solipsism" and which are not already covered by some other terms. We shall formulate conditions which must be satisfied for a given attitude to be justifiably dubbed "ethical solipsism." In other words, we shall argue that the term "ethical solipsism" singles out very specific ethical attitudes which share some characteristic – solipsism--related – features. We shall deal with these two questions, respectively, in section 2 and 3. Section 4 indicates at some further possible areas of research on ethical solipsism.

## 1. Thought experiments: morality in the solipsistic world

One can distinguish two slightly different forms of ontological solipsism. The first one – which can be called "ontological solipsism in the strict sense" – assumes that only "I" exist, and other people do not exist *at all*. The second one (captured by the Berkeleyan phrase *esse* = *percipi*) means that other people exist only when "I" perceive them. This last form can have two variants: (A) their (the other pe-

ople's) existence is "weaker" than mine when "I" perceive them; or (B) their existence is equally "solid" as mine when "I" perceive them. Now the questions we wish to ask are: what are the ethical consequences of these views?; what would morality look like in such a solipsistic world?

The first form of ontological solipsism seems to imply that "I" can do whatever "I" want to other people, since they do not really exist. If "I" do harm to another person, in fact I do no harm to anyone. "My" moral duties shrink to duties *towards "myself"*; there exist no duties *towards others*, at least in so far as these duties are to be justified in a consequentialist manner, that is: by the effects which their violation is likely to have *on other people*. For, as it seems, on different conceptions of the justification of ethics one can substantiate duties to *non-existent* others. If we assume, for instance, virtue ethics, then "I" can be required to forbear from taking harmful actions towards the non-existent others for the simple reason that such actions could contribute to developing in "myself" certain morally undesirable character traits. One can therefore say that, within virtue ethics, duties towards myself will – in the solipsistic world – encompass duties towards others. It is somewhat harder to justify duties to the non-existent others within Kantian conception of ethics, in which intentions and the good will are of crucial moral importance. Even though this conception treats effects of actions as unimportant, and therefore might seem to justify duties towards the non-existent others, one could argue that the notion of good will *towards* others makes little sense if its object does not exist. Thus, arguably, the justification of duties towards non-existent others is less convincing within Kantian ethics than within virtue ethics, which posits a clear empirical connection between a certain type of actions and personal character traits.

As for the second form of ontological solipsism, it seems to imply, that "I" can freely do harm to other people as long as "I" do not perceive them, since they do not exist then (even though it may be

somewhat difficult for "me" to do physical harm to persons whom "I" do not perceive, it is easy to harm them "morally,' e.g. by spreading malicious gossip about them). But what are "my" moral duties when "I" perceive the other person? The answer to this question will depend on what variant of the second form of ontological solipsism is assumed. If it is variant (A), then, arguably, "I" cannot do everything "I" want to her/him, but "I" can do more than "I" would be allowed to do if her/his existence did not depend "on" my perception; some form of moderate egoism may be justified by this view. If variant (B) is true, then "my" duties towards the other people are the same as they would be if solipsism were false. It should be stressed that all the above remarks about the ethical consequences of the second form of ontological solipsism, presuppose the consequentialist conception of ethics; if we assume virtue ethics (or, perhaps, Kantian ethics), then (for reasons stated earlier in this section) "my" duties do not change at all: "I" am not allowed to harm others.

The above considerations assume that the agent – "I" – knows that ontological solipsism is true. But what will happen if "my" belief in ontological solipsism is weaker, that is: if "I" believe that solipsism *may* be true? Should "I" behave as if other people existed? The answer to this question will depend on whether the choice "I" am confronted with is the choice in the conditions of risk (the probability distribution over the states of affairs "solipsism is false" and "solipsism is true" is known) or uncertainty (the probability distribution is not known). In the former case, "I" should choose this option from the two available ones ("behave as if solipsism is false" / "behave as if solipsism is true") which maximizes the expected utility (which option proves to be utility-maximizing will be determined by the exact costs and benefits that "I" shall assign to various combinations of states of affairs and options; but since the costs of the combination "solipsism is false and 'I' behave as if it were true" seem to be especially high – "I" act immorally towards people who really exist, then, arguably, "I" should behave as if solipsism were

false). In the latter case (the conditions of uncertainty), "my" choice will be determined by the choice of a criterion of rationality (unlike the conditions of risk, there is not a unique criterion of rationality for the decision in the conditions of uncertainty). For instance, if "I" accept the criterion of "maximin" (which requires that one should choose this option whose worst possible effects are the best as compared with the worst possible effects of the other options), then "I" should choose the option "behave as if solipsism is false," since the effects of behaving as if it were true in a situation in which it is false are especially negative ("I" treat the existent people as non--existent, and thereby do not act morally towards them).

We have analyzed in the preceding paragraph the situation in which an agent is not sure whether ontological solipsism is true, though he admits the possibility that it is true. This view (which may be called "probabilistic ontological solipsism") should be distinguished from the view called "epistemic solipsism," which assumes that ontological solipsism is false but asserts that the minds of other people are unknowable; we have access only to our own mental states. It is not entirely clear whether the truthfulness of this view would not change anything in our moral duties or would change them radically. In favor of this latter interpretation one could argue that epistemic solipsism support ethical egoism: if "I" can know only my mind, and thereby only my own desires and preferences, then "I" am justified in taking care only of my own interests (since these are the only interests "I" can know and can effectively take care of); this view could also be given an utilitarian justification: one can maximize social utility only by maximizing individual utility. But this argumentation is certainly controversial. We shall confine ourselves to distinguishing these two different interpretations of the effects of epistemic solipsism without trying to decide which of them is the proper one.

We shall not pass to the second context in which solipsism meets ethics.

## 2. The delimitation of the concept of ethical solipsism

Let us recall that this context is connected with the following question: To what ethical phenomena/attitudes may one legitimately refer the word "ethical solipsism"? We shall assume that a view, in order to be legitimately dubbed "ethical solipsism," must would satisfy the following two conditions: (C1) it must retain some trace of its ontological or epistemic sense (that is: an ethical solipsist must somehow belittle the reality of other persons) and at the same time (C2) entail negative ethical evaluation. These two conditions exclude some phenomena, which could *prima facie* be regarded as "ethical solipsism" from the scope of this notion. We shall discuss them first, and then we shall strive to determine what phenomenon can count as ethical solipsism.

### 2.1. What *is not* ethical solipsism?

The first phenomenon excluded by these conditions is called by psychologists "child's solipsism." This form of solipsism appears in early or later infancy. If it appears in early infancy it can be justifiably called "total solipsism": since the child's ego is still undeveloped, there is no strict border between "ego" and the "world (of things and persons)"; the child experiences, as Sigmund Freud (1930: 2) called it, the "oceanic feeling" of the unity with the external world; the child's ego, so to speak, engulfs the world. In later infancy, the child's ego differentiates itself from the world but still preserves some relics of his solipsistic attitude. His solipsism, which can be called "partial," is a result of a still not fully developed "theory of mind" – the capacity to understand the other person's cognitive and affective mental states. As a result, the "partially solipsistic" child has, for instance, problems with taking other people's perspective: he cannot, for instance, solve the so called "false belief task" (he cannot clearly distinguish his own

beliefs from those of others, and thus has a tendency to project his own beliefs onto others), or clearly differentiate his own preferences from those of others (a small child will be inclined to give other people as gifts such things which he himself enjoys most; he does not consider the possibility that others may not enjoy it). Furthermore, he tends to judge other people's actions by their effects, not intentions. In general, as emphasized by the eminent Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, child's morality is egocentric and purely consequentialist. This account of child solipsism clearly shows that it satisfies Condition 1 of our account of ethical solipsism, that is: it retains some trace of ontological solipsism (the child is not capable of fully recognizing that other people are as real as himself), but it cannot be called "ethical solipsism" because the Condition 2 is not satisfied: since the child cannot be blamed for his "solipsism," it does not entail any negative ethical evaluation. The same observation applies to those persons who suffer from mental deficits from the spectrum of autism[2]: their "mindblindness," as Simon Baron-Cohen (1995) called it, results in their being incapable of fully recognizing the reality of other persons, but since they cannot be blamed for it, one cannot regard them as "ethical solipsists."

The other phenomenon which, appearances notwithstanding, cannot be regarded as "ethical solipsism," is egotism, the syndrome

[2] And *a fortiori* to autistic children, who, in addition to their "normal" child-solipsism suffer from the dramatic (much deeper) solipsism caused by mental deficits from the spectrum of autism. As Ian I. Mitroff wrote, "the overriding fact that emerges about autistic children is that so complete is their isolation from others that they appear to be just as completely isolated from themselves – 'ghosts in the machines.' To put it mildly, this is perhaps the greatest unintended and unforeseen consequence of the solipsist's argument: *The solipsist is not only isolated from others, he is just isolated from himself*. The plain fact of the matter is that the complete psychological development of the individual's concept of a distinct 'I' doesn't take place independent of the concept of a 'we'" (Mitroff 1971: 387). But let us repeat: a child's, an autistic child's, or an autistic adult's solipisism is *not* ethical solipsism, since Condition 2 is not satisfied.

of "inflated ego." This attitude consists in the belief in one's own superiority over other persons and in one's having special rights and privileges flowing from this purported superiority. It leads to self-confidence bordering on arrogance, insolence, overbearing pride, self-aggrandizement, the inability to discern the achievements of other people, and the susceptibility to feel rage if one's purported superiority is questioned. Egotism satisfies the Condition 2 of ethical solipsism (it entails negative evaluation) but fails to satisfy Condition 1, since it it implies the recognition of the existence of others: the egotist must compare himself with others. As was aptly noticed by Kant (though what Kant calls "moral egoism," we prefer to call "egotism"):

> Moral egoism is when man thinks highly of himself only in relation to others. But we have to judge of our worth, not in relation to others, but in relation to the rule of moral law; for the measuring-rod furnished by other people is highly contingent, and then a quite different worth emerges. If we find, on the contrary, that we have no such worth as others, we hate those whose worth is greater; and from this arises envy and ill-will. (Kant ed. 1997: 137)

Due to the fact that egotism is in its essence comparative, it is also unstable: if an egotist's comparison with others turns out to be favorable for him, he feels well, and is confirmed in his arrogance, but if the comparison turns out to be unfavorable, he may turn to self-deprecation. Clearly, there is a self-deceitful tendency in an egotist to interpret comparisons in his favor, but, since it cannot be excluded that, one some occasion, he shall compare poorly with others, the egotist is ridden with a more or less conscious anxiety about his status (in his own eyes), and thus is exposed to the risk of constantly oscillating between self-aggrandizement and self-deprecation (this instability can also account for the egotist's susceptibility to fall into rage when the high "status" which he arrogates is questioned).

It should also be added that egotism can be accompanied by vanity, that is: a strong need of the approval and appreciation by others. If an egotist is vain, we shall call him a "narcissistic egotist," and if he is free from vanity – a "non-narcissistic egotist." It can be easily noticed that narcissistic egotism is even more distant from ethical solipsism than non-narcissistic egotism, because it implies the stronger dependence on other persons (and thereby the stronger recognition of their reality, as well as the stronger tendency to oscillate between self-aggrandizement and self-deprecation): not only does the narcissistic egotist compare himself with others but also counts on the others' approval and appreciation. It bears noticing that in the above analysis we have assumed an ordinary, not scientific, usage of the term "narcissism," viz. as vanity flowing from an excessive love/admiration of oneself. It is essentially different from the scientific – medical (psychiatric) understanding of this term, where it functions in the context of the so called "narcissistic personality disorder" (NPD), and is close to what is called "egotism." More precisely, NPD is characterized by its "seven deadly sins": shamelessness, magical thinking, arrogance, envy, entitlement, exploitation, bad boundaries – not noticing that other people are separate, not just extensions of oneself (cf. Hotchkiss, Masterson 2003). One can also distinguish the third understanding of narcissism (which is a radicalized version of the first one), viz. as the *exclusive* and excessive love/admiration of oneself. We shall return to this last sense of narcissism in section 3.2., where we shall argue that it can be treated as a form of ethical solipsism.

The third phenomenon excluded by the two conditions (C1 and C2) from the scope of ethical solipsism is a certain attitude called "ethical solipsism" by the Finnish philosopher Sami Philström (2011), viz. the ethical attitude which consists in radical humility (I have the right to pass moral judgment only about myself, not about others) and/or particularly strong sense of responsibility (I have responsibility for the other persons: I am obliged to do everything, including self-sacrifice, for all other persons, but I cannot require or even expect

similar self-sacrifice from other persons; accordingly, what I ought to morally require from myself cannot be even compared with what I may morally require from other persons). The first part of this attitude was most clearly expressed in the New Testament (Mt 7:1–6; Jn 8:6–11), and the second one, more radical, was most forcefully articulated in the book *Totalité et infini*: *essai sur l'extériorité* by Emmanuel Lévinas, who emphasized that "my" responsibility for all other persons cannot be shared with others, that "I" am obliged to substitute (sacrifice) myself for all, even though no one is obliged to substitute himself for "me"; I should therefore, as Lévinas put it, consider myself to be a *hostage* of others. One can easily understand reasons for which Philström decided to call this view (especially in its second part) "ethical solipsism": it may indeed look as if Lévinas's ethics requires that each person should regard himself as the sole bearer of moral duties, and, what's more, the sole bearer of *very strict and demanding* moral duties. But this asymmetry of ethical relations postulated by Lévinas occurs only at the subjective level (the ethical relation ought to be viewed as asymmetrical from an individual's perspective). Were we to look from a general perspective at a group of people following Lévinas's ethics, then it would turn out that there are many bearers of moral duties (that is: each of them treats himself as a bearer of moral duties). But there are two stronger reasons for not using the term "ethical solipsism" with regard to this view. Firstly, "ethical solipsism" has negative connotations, whereas the above ethical view entails an extremely positive ethical evaluation. This view, especially as regards its second part (concerning responsibility), can be called "moral radicalism." Furthermore, it implies a strong recognition of the reality of other persons (especially on the grounds of Lévinas's ethics, other people are regarded as more real than "myself" – I should treat them as counting more than "myself"; I am therefore expected to be self-effacing – ready to sacrifice my own well-being for their sake). Consequently, this view does not satisfy any of the two conditions of ethical solipsism (as we understand it).

## 2.2. What *is* ethical solipsism?

The first phenomenon which can be regarded as ethical solipsism is radical narcissism – an *exclusive and excessive* love/admiration of oneself. If love of oneself goes so far as to be the *only* type of love that a given agent feels, he comes very close to the situation in which he does not recognize the existence of others, especially, if we assume, following many philosophers, that the full recognition of the existence of others can be attained only through the medium of love.[3] Similar to radical narcissism is "moral solipsism" in the Kantian sense. Kant defined "moral solipsism" as a situation "when we love only ourselves alone, in relation to others" (Kant ed. 1997: 137). Even though Kant's definition, when taken literally, does not satisfy Condition 1 (because, if one loves only himself alone *in relation to others*, this must imply that one makes some comparison between himself and others and thereby in some way recognizes their existence), it can be regarded as being close to it in its spirit.

In order to examine two other forms of ethical solipsism (radical/extreme egoism and cognitive-based egoism), some conceptual distinctions will be necessary.

By egoism we shall understand an agent's tendency to pursue his own interests in an exceedingly high degree, that is, without duly respecting the other agents' interests. This is a *behavioural* definition; it does not determine motives or psychological sources of egoism. One might be tempted to argue that each form of egoism should

[3] This thought was expressed, in different words, by such philosophers, as, for instance: Richard of St. Victor (who wrote: "Amor oculus est et amare videre est"), Thomas Aquinas (who wrote in *Scriptum super Sententiis* (3 d. 35, I, 21): "Ubi amor, ibi oculus"); Simone Weil (who wrote in *La pesanteur et la grace* that "La croyance à l'existence d'autres êtres humains comme tells est amour"), Gabriel Marcel (who wrote "Aimer un être, c'est lui dire: toi, tu ne mourras pas"), or Max Scheler, who, in his book *Liebe und Erkenntnis* forcefully defended the thesis that love is a precondition of cognition.

be called "ethical solipsism," because in each instance of egoistic behavior one can discern indifference to other persons – the indifference which can be described, in terms proposed by Martin Buber (1983), as the tendency to treat other persons as objects – to replace the personal relation based on *You* (*Du*) with the impersonal relation based on *It* (*Es*). But such an extension of the term "ethical solipsism" would be misleading and useless from the philosophical point of view. It would be misleading because it would amount to applying the concept of ethical solipsism to very different forms of egoism: to those in which the existence of other is fully recognized, and to those in which it is neglected. As a result, it would be also useless from a philosophical point of view, as it would fail to capture the specific character of ethical solipsism. The mere fact one can justifiably maintain that in every instance of egoistic behavior the other person is treated as an "object" does not constitute a counter-argument to the above claim. For the very phrase "treating as an object" has a metaphorical character; it does not mean primarily that the other person is, at the epistemic level and consequently at the practical level, *taken to be* a thing/object (such situations happen in the domain of sexual relations – where the other persons is often treated as a mere body, but outside this domain they are rare and belong to the field of psychopathology), but that her rights as a person, not as an object, are denied or downplayed.

Let us notice, by way of digression, that in addition to the two above meanings of the phrase "treating as an object" one may distinguish also two other ones. Firstly, when we say that a given person is an object of our friendship, benevolence, gratitude, enmity, etc., we employ a purely formal meaning of this phrase. In this sense anything to which a given intentional attitude is directed is its "object." This kind of "objectification" is morally innocent (and if it is not, it is not because a given person is an "object" of our attitude, but because of the content of this attitude, e.g., enmity or hate). Secondly, when we say that the other person is an object of somebody's sexual desire/

love we may mean that this person is treated as a mere body, but we may also mean something else: that sexual love/desire "is directed towards a person in her entirety, viewing her therefore as someone, not something, but nevertheless someone to be used and possessed" (Langton 1997: 139). Rae Langton calls this type of desire – for a person as a person – an "invasive" desire, as opposed to a desire for a person as body, which she calls "a reductive desire."[4] Only reductive (sexual) desire can be called "solipsistic." But it is hard to speak about egoism (in the above mentioned sense) in the domain of sexual relations.

[4] One can put Langton's thought in a different way by distinguishing two stages at which we can treat the other person as a person or as an object: epistemic (that of cognition) and practical (that of treatment). The following combinations are possible: O–O (treating the other person as an object at both stages); O–P (treating the other person as an object at the first stage, and as a person at the second one); P–O and P–P. Now, the combination P–O is characteristic for an invasive desire, and O–O – for a reductive desire. Combination P–P is a morally proper way of treating other persons. It seems that combination O–P is internally contradictory (one cannot treat a person as a person if one regards her as an object). As for combination P–O, even though it is not internally contradictory, it may be self-defeating; as was aptly noticed by Rae Langton, "knowledge of another person that is possessive of that person is impossible […]. The goal of possessor is not identical to the goal of knowledge […] but inimical to it. For Marcel [the hero of Proust's *opus magnum* – W. Z.] to treat Albertine as a potential possession, a puppet whose actions are controlled and scripted is for him to doom himself to *ignorance* of her. To aim for possession and control is to thwart the knowledge that was his goal in the first place […]. To possess and control someone is *not* to know them: so to the extent that Marcel succeeds in possessing and controlling, to the extent that he *succeeds* in making Albertine play his scripted role, to that extent he fails to know her […]. [On the other hand – W. Z.], if one *believes* that to possess and control someone is to know them, then one believes that failure to possess is failure to know: so to the extent that Marcel *fails* to possess and control, and believes that he fails to possess and control, he believes that he fails to know […]. Hope of knowledge is blocked by the attempt to control and possess, *whether the attempt succeeds or fails*" (Langton 1997: 144).

In summary: not every kind of behavioral egoism can be called "ethical solipsism." Egoism can be plausibly called "ethical solipsism" only in two cases: when its behavioral aspect takes a radical/extreme form, or when it possesses a specific (solipsism-related) motivational/psychological aspect. Let us discuss them at greater length.

The first form of egoism-related ethical solipsism arises when we radicalize the behavior aspect of egoism. As was argued, an agent is egoistic if he does not respect the interests of other people, that is: if he gives stronger priority to his own interests than is allowed by moral rules.[5] But one can imagine a radical/extreme form of egoism, in which the interests of others are totally disregarded or explicitly negated, not taken into account even in the minimal degree. Accordingly, the radical egoist does not just fail to assign proper weight to the interests of others; he does not assign any weight to them. This kind of egoism can be justifiably regarded as ethical solipsism, even though the latter's Condition 1 is not satisfied in the literal sense (the radical egoist need not negate the reality of others). But, in practice, his behavior takes such a form *as if* he negated the reality of others.[6] Radical egoism is practiced by few people (either by the mad or by the evil to the core). It was defended as an cogent ethical view by at least two philosophers: Marquis de Sade and (in a somewhat less extreme form) Max Stirner. Let us look more closely at how they reached this view.

Marquise de Sade's version of ethical solipsism – *philosophie de libertinage* – is based on two main assumptions. The first one is the absolutization of physical pleasure: nothing which gives us pleasure can be bad, and since – according to de Sade – pain we inflict on others may be especially exciting, as it cannot be simulated and

[5] Most moral theories allow giving *some* priority to one's own interests.

[6] Let us notice that a radical egoist may be an egotist, but what makes him an ethical solipsist is his radical egoism, not egotism; as we have argued in Section 3, egotism by itself is not ethical solipsism.

attests to our power, then sadistic – cruel – pleasure is permissible. We can freely give vent to our innate cruelty (according to de Sade, this is the first feeling infused in us by nature), even if it leads to the universal chaos – to the war of all against all. It should be stressed that this absolutization of physical pleasure has, within de Sade's philosophy, a strongly individualistic – solipsistic – character; he writes explicitly that "my" pleasure, even if it is very small, can be pursued even at the cost of causing much greater pain to many people. The second assumption is the idiosyncratic conception of the (moral) law of nature according to which nothing that is physically possible us inconsistent with the law of nature; as de Sade put it: "La destruction étant une des premières lois de la nature, rien de ce qui détruit ne saurait être un crime" (de Sade ed. 1976: 107). Accordingly, murder, including the murder of one's parents and children, incest, sadism sexual perversions are permissible and even recommended (Eugénie – a young heroine of de Sade's *La philosophie dans le boudoir* – is encouraged by depraved libertines to kill her mother). In fact, according to de Sade, murder is only a change of form – a transmutation rather than an annihilation; by murdering we give back matter to nature out of which it can create new forms; consequently: "Le meurtre ne peut jamais outrager la nature" (de Sade ed. 1976: 141). These two assumptions led to the most demonic philosophy ever conceived in the history Western thought – the philosophy which appears to make out of a cruel nature a kind of deity, and which allows each individual to freely pursue all his or her desires.[7] It is not a pleasant task to delve into the psychology of

[7] In this sense, de Sade's ethical egoism is a form of what John Rawls called "general egoism" – the view according to which "everyone is permitted to advance his interests as he pleases" (Rawls 1973: 124). As such, it should be distinguished from two other forms of egoism discussed by Rawls: first-person dictatorship ("everyone is to serve my interests") and free-rider egoism ("everyone is to act justly except for myself, if I choose not to"). Rawls criticizes all these forms of egoism on the ground that they do not fulfill certain plausible formal constraints

de Sade and to strive to guess what deeper psychological motives could have led him to endorse these assumptions. But if one were to undertake this task, one could argue that the motive could have been his utmost terror at the materialistic vision of the universe which he believed to be true (if there is no God, if there is no higher purpose in nature, if nature is "cruel," deterministic, totally indifferent to the well-being of humans, and if, consequently, an individual human being is just an insignificant, meaningless particle of nature, a physical machine ruled by deterministic laws, then everything may indeed be permitted, including *radical*/*extreme* egoism).

Stirner's version of radical/extreme egoism, not much less radical in content (though much less radical in the form of its presentation) than de Sade's, is based on extreme nominalism (only individuals exist – God, humanity, morality are fictions, "phantoms," which enslave individuals if they decide to serve them), epistemic solipsism (human beings are monads – they cannot know each other), and moral nihilism (each human being is a "creative nothingness," who can do whatever lies in his power, since *Gewalt geht vor Recht*, or rather: *Gewalt* is the source of *Recht*). The result of this nihilistic philosophy is radical egoism, which allows incest, murder, and all other immoral (on the common understanding of morality) actions if only these types of action are wished by "me," if "I" find them to be a proper way of expressing my *Eigenheit* (peculiarity, specificity). Stirner was perfectly aware of the fact that his "ethics" may lead to the war of all against all, and fully accepted this consequence. It is therefore not surprising that he chose for a motto of his book

imposed on moral principles. First-person dictatorship and general egoism do not satisfy the condition of being "general in form," and general egoism, though being general in form (since it does not single out concrete human beings as morally privileged) fails to satisfy the condition of "imposing an ordering on conflicting on claims"; it cannot therefore resolve the conflict of interests which will inevitably arise if even a small number of people will practice general egoism.

the first line of Goethe's poem *Vanitas* which says: "Ich hab' mein Sach' auf Nichts gestellt."

The second form of egoism-related ethical solipsism deserves this name by virtue of its motivational aspect rather than (as in the case of radical egoism) the behavioural one. We shall call it "cognitively--based/egocentric egoism."[8] It flows from the cognitive bias of egocentrism, that is: from overestimating the "reality" of oneself as compared with the "reality" of others. For an agent who manifests this form of egoism other people are substantially "less real" than himself – or even "unreal." Egocentrism underlying this form of egoism seems to be at least partly caused by the fact that we have a direct access to our *ego*, to our mental life, and lack a direct access to other people's *egos*, to their mental life; the other people's mental states (beliefs, emotions, attitudes) can only be known indirectly; as was already noticed by Cicero: „Quia magis ea percipimus atque sentimus, quae nobis ipsis aut prospera aut adversa eveniunt, quam illa, quae ceteris, quae quasi longo intervallo interiecto videmus, aliter de illis ac de nobis iudicamus" (*De officiis*, I, 30).[9] The fact that we have a privileged access to our own mental life does not have to lead to egoism, although, as it seems, it often leads to the conviction that other people are somewhat less real than ourselves; most of us are to some extent "naturally" egocentric. This privileged access leads to egoism only if egocentrism assumes (for reasons to be ascertained by empirical psychology) a form a *strong* egocentrism, i.e., if it generates in the agent a conviction that other people are *substantially* less real than himself or even unreal – that, figura-

[8] The following paragraph is partly based a fragment from our earlier article (Załuski 2016: 268–269).

[9] Similar thoughts about the essential difference in the manner in which we perceive others' mental states and our own, and its ethical consequences, were formulated by many other thinkers (e.g., by Arthur Schopenhauer in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, and William James, in an essay *On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings*).

tively speaking, the ontological status of other people resembles that of "shadows" (they are regarded more as objects than as real persons). It should be stressed that egocentrism in the above sense is different from two other senses of egocentrism which appear both in ordinary speech and in the scientific discourse, viz. as an "excessive preoccupation with oneself," and as "the inability or rather unwillingness" to take the other people's perspective into account (whose consequence is "projecting" one's own beliefs, intentions onto other people, and thereby the weakening of cognitive empathy).[10] An egocentric in any of these two other senses of egocentrism person does not necessarily downplay the "reality" of other people.

## Final remarks

We have distinguished three attitudes – radical/extreme narcissism, radical/extreme egoism, and cognitive-based (egocentric) egoism – which satisfy the two necessary and jointly sufficient conditions of ethical solipsism. But we do not maintain that there do not exist other attitudes or propensities which satisfy these conditions. Let us, by way of conclusion, mention about four other phenomena which seem to satisfy these conditions, though whether they actually satisfy them is a moot question which we shall not undertake to resolve in this paper.

The first one is solipsistic, sentimental love, which consists in being in love with love, not in the object of love. The solipsistic lover's

[10] These two types of egocentrism are characteristic above all (though not only) for (many) adolescents, whose personal identity is still fragile, and who, as a result, have problems with self-acceptance and are uncertain whether they are accepted by others. The common element of these three types of egocentrism is the absence of self-admiration, which is central to egotism and narcissism.

source of happiness are his or her own feelings, not the object of his or her love (or the well-being of this object). Consequently, the object of the solipsistic lover's love is easily replaceable; its role is only functional – it is just a contingent point of crystallization of the solipsistic lover's sentiments. The second one is the so called Identified Victim Effect – a certain cognitive or motivational bias which consists in that we are more willing to help, and less reluctant to harm, "identified" persons (those whom we can see), as opposed to "statistical" ones (those of whom we have only an abstract knowledge) (cf., e.g., Kogut, Ritov 2005). It seems that one could reinterpret this effect as a form of "ethical solipsism"; on this interpretation, one could say that the statistical victims are treated in a solipsistic manner (as if they did not exist or at least as if their reality was somehow "weaker"). The third one is what was called by Bogusław Wolniewicz (2017: 287) "auto-centrism," that is: an agent's attitude which consists in his deep concern with moral perfection of his soul. It is different both from egocentrism and "vulgar" egoism, but it can be regarded, following Aristotle's analyses form Book IX of *Nicomachean Ethics*, as an instance of egoism/self-love (*philautia*). Aristotle does not hesitate to evaluate it positively (hence he calls it good, true self-love, arguing that "if all were to strive towards what is noble and strain every nerve to do the noblest deeds, everything would be as it should be for the common weal" (EN: 1169a8–11)), but one may ask whether this attitude is to be fully recommended. If it is to be understood as a *conscious*, persistent pursuit of *one's own* moral perfection, and *only* of one's own, then there would be something solipsistic, morally dubious in it. Finally, as was already mentioned *en passant* in this paper, one could argue, following many eminent thinkers (e.g., Richard of St. Victor, Thomas Aquinas, Max Scheler, Simone Weil, Gabriel Marcel) that we can truly know, and thereby recognize the existence of, only those persons whom we love. If this were true, it would imply that our attitude towards those whom do not love – to whom we are

indifferent, or whom we hate or dislike – is to some extent at least solipsistic.

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