
Is Absolute Idealism Solipsistic?

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IS ABSOLUTE IDEALISM SOLIPSISTIC?

THE possibility of solipsism and its consequences is one of many important philosophic questions which after long and undue neglect seem now at length to be attracting attention. The question of solipsism in its various aspects has a most vital bearing on the ultimate problems of metaphysics. It is easy to see that every idealistic way of interpreting experience can not honestly avoid an explicit and exhaustive discussion of its relations to solipsism. For every approach to idealism is so closely beset on either side by the precipices of solipsism that every step has to be careful, and a false step must at once be fatal. The course of realistic philosophies, no doubt, is in this respect less dangerous; but they, too, are interested in the problem. They have a direct interest in precipitating all idealisms into solipsism. They tend, however, to treat it too lightly as a *reductio ad absurdum*, without sufficiently explaining why. Its absurdity appears to be regarded as practical rather than as theoretical, but even so the instinctive feeling that solipsism 'won't do' should be elaborated into a conclusive proof that it must of necessity lead to impracticable consequences. Lastly, as a final proof of the prevalent vagueness of philosophic thought on this subject, it may be mentioned that it has even been debated whether radical empiricism is not solipsistic.¹

It would seem, therefore, decidedly opportune to inquire further into the philosophic affinities of solipsism, and more particularly into its unexplored relations to absolute idealism. For that form of idealism has hitherto escaped suspicion by reason of the loudness of its protestations against solipsism. But such excessive protests are themselves suspicious, and it should not be surprising to find that whether or not solipsism is a bad thing and an untenable, whether or not other idealisms can escape from it, absolute idealism, at all events, contains implications which reduce it to a choice between solipsism and suicide.

¹ See this JOURNAL, Vol. II., No. 5 and Vol. II., No. 9.

To show this, our first step will have to be the amending of the current definition of solipsism. For by reason, doubtless, of the scarcity or non-existence of solipsists interested in their own proper definition, its statement is usually defective. When solipsism is defined as the doctrine that *as all experience is my experience, I alone exist*, it is taken for granted (1) that there can be only one solipsist, and (2) that he must be 'I' and not 'you.'

Both of these assumptions, however, are erroneous. Indeed, the full atrocity of solipsism only reveals itself when it is perceived that solipsists may exist in the plural, and attempt to conceive *me* as parts of *them*. The definition, therefore, of solipsism must not content itself with providing for the existence of a single solipsist, *i. e.*, with stating how 'I' could define 'my' solipsism (if I were a solipsist). It should provide me also with a basis for argument against 'your' solipsism and that of others. For that is the really intolerable annoyance of solipsism. If I felt reckless or strong enough to shoulder the responsibility, I might not object to a solipsism that made *me* the all by emphasizing the inevitable relation of experience to an experient: the trouble comes when *other* experients claim a monopoly of this relation in the face of conflicting claims, and propose to reduce *me* to incidents in *their* cosmic nightmare.

Solipsism, therefore, should be conceived with greater generality. It should cover the doctrine that the whole of reality has a single owner and is relative to a single experient, and that beyond such an experient nothing further need be assumed, without implying that I am the only 'I' that owns the universe. *Any 'I' will do.* Any I that thinks it is all that is, is a solipsist. And solipsism will be true if *any one* of the many 'I's' that are, or may be, solipsists is right, and really is all that is. Provided, of course, he knows it.

How, now, can this amended definition be applied to the case of absolute idealism? We must note first that my (our) experience is not to be regarded as wholly irrelevant to that philosophy. Indeed, in all its forms it seems to rest essentially on an argument from the ideality of my (our) experience to the ideality of all experience. For the former is taken as proof that all reality is relative to a knower, who, however, is not necessarily the individual knower, but may (or must) be an all-embracing subject, sustaining us and all the world besides. Indeed absolute idealists have so convinced themselves of the moral and spiritual superiority of their absolute knower that they habitually speak in terms of contemptuous disparagement of their 'private self' as 'a miserable abstraction.'² And from the standpoint of their private self such language is no doubt justified:

² *E. g.*, Mr. Bradley: 'Appearance and Reality,' p. 259.

it inflicts on it salutary humiliations and represses any tendency it might otherwise have to expand itself solipsistically into the all.

But how does it look from the standpoint of the absolute self? For that, too, has been conceived as a self, and therefore as capable of raising solipsistic claims. Can the absolute self be deterred from excesses of self-elation by the reflection that it is not, after all, the totality of existence? Assuredly not: for *ex hypothesi* that is precisely what it is. It includes all things and is all things in all things. If it can not be said to 'create' all things, it is only on the technical ground that since a subject implies an object, and the world must be coeternal with its 'creator,' 'creation' is an impossible idea. Nevertheless, the dependence of all things on the absolute self must be absolute. *And if it is conscious, it must know this.* For else the ultimate truth about reality would be hidden from the absolute knower, though apparently revealed to the (comparative) ignorance of quite a number of philosophers.

But is not this equivalent to saying (1) that *the absolute must be a solipsist*, and (2) that *solipsism is the absolute truth*?

The inference is plain, and confirmed also by the admirable fitness of the absolute to play the solipsist in other ways. For the arguments against solipsism have derived what success they have achieved from the habit of conceiving it as the freak of an individual self: they recoil helplessly from an absolute solipsism. Even Mr. Bradley would probably admit, *e. g.*, that the absolute, being out of time, would not be perplexed by the necessity of transcending its present experience in order to complete itself.³

³Though it is not perhaps strictly necessary, I may here note that Mr. Bradley's refutation of solipsism in 'Appearance and Reality,' ch. XXI., seems to fail for (at least) three reasons. (1) Solipsism no doubt does not rest upon 'direct' experience merely, *i. e.*, it is not a congenital, but an acquired, theory. Still 'indirect' experience must sooner or later return to and enter into direct present experience, under penalty of ceasing to be 'experience' at all. And so the solipsistic hypothesis, though doubtless it is not what any one starts with, may suggest itself as the explanation of experience and be confirmed, even as the solipsistic interpretation of part of it, *viz.*, our dream-experience, is now confirmed, namely by the discovery that there is after all nothing in direct experience which forbids its adoption. Mr. Bradley, therefore, fails to pin solipsism down to the alternative 'based either on direct or on indirect experience.' It can rest on *both*. (2) He objects to the enriching of the 'this' of direct experience by the results of indirect experience, on the ground that they are *imported*, *i. e.*, were not *originally* in it (p. 251). Yet on p. 254 he disavows the relevance of the argument from origins! (3) His argument never really gets to, and consequently never really gets at, the solipsistic standpoint, and he always presupposes the more usual assumptions as to 'a palpable community of the private self with the universe.' But the solipsist has not, and can not have, a private self to distinguish (except in appearance) from the universe, just because he is a solipsist and includes all things. His position, therefore, leaves no foothold for Mr. Bradley's argument.

But though the inference from absolute idealism to solipsism seems unavoidable, it would be affectation to pretend that it involves no difficulties. I do not count among these the fact that it will probably be exceedingly unpalatable to absolute idealists, and may even compel them to temper their denunciations of subjective idealism. For, after all, they are men (by their own confession) accustomed to follow truth wheresoever she flits, and to sacrifice their personal feelings. But there does seem to arise a deplorable difficulty about bringing into accord the absolute's point of view with our own.

For the absolute, solipsism is true and forms a standpoint safe, convenient and irrefragable. But for us there arises an antinomy. We have on the one hand to admit that solipsism is absolute truth, seeing that the standpoint of the absolute is absolute truth, and that our imperfect human truth is relative to this standard. If, therefore, solipsism is true *sub specie absoluti*, and we can know it to be so, we ought to think it so. We ought, that is, to think it true that 'I am all that is.' The absolute has proved it. And not only for itself, but equally for any other 'I.' For regarded as a function to which all experience is related, no 'I' differs from any other. Any 'I,' therefore, may claim to profit by the truth of solipsism. It will be awkward, no doubt, at first to have to conceive a plurality of solipsists, each claiming to be the sole and sufficient reason for the existence of everything—but I suppose we might get used to that. It seems, however, a more serious implication that each of them, if his claim were admitted, would render superfluous the assumption of an absolute knower beyond himself. Instead of being absorbed in the absolute, as heretofore, each individual solipsist would swallow up the absolute. This consequence may seem bizarre, but does it not follow from the premises?

The same conclusion follows also in another way. The absolute *ex hypothesi* is and owns each 'private self.' And the absolute is a solipsist. This feature, therefore, of the truth must be reflected in each private self. They must all be solipsists. But this is merely the truth of solipsism looked at from the standpoint of the private self. It must claim to be all because the absolute is all and it is the absolute as alone the absolute can be known. The absorption of the absolute and the individual thus is mutual, because it is merely the same truth of their community of substance differently viewed.

On the other hand, it seems most unfortunate that in practice we all negate the truth of solipsism, and, absolute or no, must continue so to do. Even if the impracticability of solipsism had been exaggerated, and philosophy had been too hasty in assuming this, the working assumptions of ordinary life would be rendered ridicu-

lous, and our feelings would be hurt, if solipsism were true. It may be said, however, that the practical absurdity and inconvenience of a theory is no argument against it, at least in the eyes of intellectualism.

But even waiving this, does it not remain an intellectual difficulty that we have ourselves destroyed the path that led from idealism to the absolute? The absolute was reached (rightly or wrongly) as a way of avoiding the solipsistic interpretation of experience, which it was feared idealism might otherwise entail. It now turns out that the absolute itself insists on the truth of solipsism. And yet if solipsism is true, there is no reason at all for transcending the individual experience of each solipsist! It would seem, therefore, that we can not admit the truth of solipsism without ruining our absolute, nor admit our absolute without admitting the truth of solipsism. We are eternally condemned, therefore, *either* to labor under an illusion, *viz.*, that that is false which is really true, and which we really know to be true though we can not treat it as true without leaving our only standpoint, the human, *or* to reject the very source and standard of truth itself.

In conclusion, I can only very briefly indicate what seems to me to be a way by which absolute idealism can escape these difficulties, even though it may perhaps lead to further troubles. Of course, from the standpoint of absolute idealism the truth of solipsism is only valid if the absolute is assumed to be conscious. We can, therefore, avoid the fatal admission by assuming that it is not. The absolute, that is, is unconscious mind, as von Hartmann long ago contended. But what is unconscious mind? The inherent weakness of the 'proof' of absolute idealism lies in its proceeding from the finite human mind, which we know, to an 'infinite' non-human mind very imperfectly analogous to it, and (apparently) incapable of being known by us. This transition becomes more and more hazardous the further we depart from the analogy with human minds. It may fairly be disputed, therefore, whether there is any sense in calling an unconscious mind a mind at all. But if the unconscious absolute ceases to be conceived as mind, what becomes of the idealistic side of absolutism? Among the absolutists many, no doubt, would be quite willing (under pressure) to move towards the conclusions thus outlined; but would not this involve a final breach with their theological allies, to whom the chief attraction of absolute idealism has always been that it appeared to provide for a 'spiritual' view of existence? But possibly neither philosophy nor theology would suffer irreparable loss by the self-elimination of absolute idealism.

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