

Solipsism

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Philosophical Concept

‘Solipsism’ (from the Latin *solus ipse* – oneself alone) is the doctrine that only oneself exists. This formulation covers two doctrines, each of which has been called solipsism, namely (1) that one is the only self, the only centre of consciousness, and, more radically, (2) that nothing at all exists apart from one’s own mind and mental states. These are not always distinguished from corresponding epistemic forms: for all we know, (1) or (2) might be true.

A more recent coinage is ‘methodological solipsism’, which has a quite different meaning: that the content of an individual’s thoughts is fully determined by facts about them, and is independent of facts about their environment.

Philosophical interest in solipsism does not arise from the fact that some significant philosopher has advocated it, for none has done so. Rather, solipsism has played dialectical roles, as for instance when philosophers try to argue that their opponents’ positions, consistently pursued, lead to solipsism – and are thereby shown to be harbouring an absurdity. It plays another such role when philosophers ask whether there are any rational considerations capable of refuting it. More extreme forms of scepticism are sometimes treated in the same way – unsurprisingly, since the epistemic versions of solipsism are themselves extreme forms of scepticism.

That one is, for all one knows, the only centre of consciousness, is precisely the traditional problem of other minds (see Other minds). It can be based on the thoughts that one has no direct awareness of the mental states of others, and that to infer that they must have mental states because of the outward resemblance between their bodily behaviour and one’s own is to make an inference based on one case only – not normally regarded as sound inductive procedure. Another, more radical, argument is that one is unable even to form any concept of a state of consciousness that is not one’s own. This approach is discussed by Wittgenstein – who was not, however, recommending that we should accept its conclusion, but rather that we should abandon the natural, though mistaken, conception of a state of consciousness which leads us into it. On a right understanding of the matter, ascriptions of mental states to ourselves and to others are co-ordinate achievements. Solipsists wrongly think they can ascribe such states to themselves and *then* consider the question whether other human bodies have associated mental states as well (see Criteria; Private language argument).

The second type of solipsism, which finds problematic not just the existence of other minds but of *everything* other than one's own mind and mental states, is a very close relation of scepticism about the existence of the external world (see Scepticism). Although closely related, it is not the same thing, since a number of philosophers from widely varying traditions have denied the existence – or at least the independent existence – of a material world, while showing no tendency to assert that theirs was the only mind. Berkeley is a prime example, and Dharmakīrti, having portrayed the material world as illusory, wrote a treatise explaining why solipsism was not an inevitable consequence.

The expression 'methodological solipsism' is a recent coinage popularized by, in particular, Hilary Putnam and Jerry Fodor. This phrase refers to the view that the content of an individual's thoughts is fully determined by intrinsic, non-relational facts about that individual, hence is not affected by the nature of the objects that form their environment (see Content: wide and narrow; Methodological individualism).

References and further reading

Dharmakīrti (mid 7th century) Samtānāntarasiddhi (Proof of other continua); English trans. in Kitagawa, Hidenori, Indo koten ronrigaku no kenkyū: Jinna (Dignāga) no taikai, Tokyo: Suzuki Gakujutsu Zaidan, 2nd edn, 1973, Appendix A.

(Dharmakīrti's defence against the threat of solipsism. The 'continuum' of the Sanskrit title is a Buddhist word for mind in the sense of a continuous series of mental events.)

Russell, B. (1948) Human Knowledge: its Scope and its Limits, London: George Allen & Unwin.

(Part III Chapter 2, 'Solipsism', introduces a radical version of solipsism and considers reasons against it.)

Wittgenstein, L. (1953) Philosophical Investigations, Oxford: Blackwell.

(Contains an extended discussion of the idea that mental states are inner objects, awareness of which gives us our primary understanding of the mental – see approximately Sections 243–317; suggestive, but difficult.)