

## There is no problem of other minds

I shall argue that you can substantially refute the most persuasive variety of solipsism by taking its most plausible version seriously, and then showing that it is not rational to hold, once one understands the nature of metaphysical commitments.<sup>1</sup> In the first section, I argue that the only viable form of solipsism involves *de dicto* self-reference. In the second, I argue that this position involves a claim of contingent identity, for which some actual worlds are those where solipsism is not the case. The argument turns on a conception of metaphysics that involves the study of the universal features of *actually possible* worlds (i.e., realistic necessity).

Here is the argument in boilerplate:

1. Solipsism *simpliciter* implies self-reference.
2. There are two kinds of self-reference, *de dicto* and *de re*.
  - a. There are only two varieties of solipsism, the solipsism of the present moment and the solipsism of the long-haul.
  - b. Solipsism of the long-haul implies a divided self, which is not solipsism at all.
  - c. So, the only viable version of solipsism is solipsism of the present moment.
  - d. Solipsism of the present moment requires *de dicto* self-reference.
3. So, the only viable solipsism depends on *de dicto* self-reference.
4. However, the solipsist's *de dicto* self-reference implies contingent identity.
  - a. Properly speaking, metaphysical theories make claims about all those possible worlds that are *actually possible*.
  - b. Metaphysically contingent identity claims imply that, in some possible actual worlds, the knowing subject is apparently not self-identical -- albeit not the world right now.
  - c. If there are actual worlds where the self is not identical to itself, then that implies other persons apparently exist outside of the present moment.
5. Hence, solipsism of the present moment acknowledges the falsity of solipsism *simpliciter*.
6. Since all versions of solipsism are false, solipsism *simpliciter* is false.

### 1 Reference

There are at least two sorts of solipsist, the epistemological and the metaphysical. The epistemological solipsist infers that the knowing subject is the whole of the world, on the basis of empirical experience. Their conclusions are provisional or probabilistic, so not of interest here. In

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the strength of this argumentative tactic lies in the attempt to identify a hidden contrast in the nature of veridical representation without assuming that such representations are a feature of ostensibly public representations, like language and linguistic meaning. As far as I can tell, few self-described attempts to refute solipsism have attempted exploit this strategy in any serious way, with the exception of Andrew Ushenko's enduring reply to McGreal. (1948) See: Ushenko, Andrew. 1948. "The Solipsist Phenomenon." *The Philosophical Review* 57 (5) (Sept. 1948). pp. 505-508. It is also worth reading Alfred Stern's proposed refutation of solipsism. It contains some surface similarities to the present argument, albeit with a vastly different strategy. Where Stern argues that the whole matter turns on clarifications of the notions of 'thought' and 'personality', I cannot assent to his diagnosis, as it seems to reify the products of imagination, which hardly resonates with the methodological conservatism that is characteristic of the solipsistic position. Still, see: Stern, Alfred. 1948. "Toward a Solution of the Problem of Solipsism." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. 8(4) (Jun. 1948) pp. 679-687.

contrast, the metaphysical solipsist argues for the truth of the following proposition: that there exists only one thing, and that that thing is the knowing subject (i.e., me). The knowing subject is the person tokened by way of self-reference.

Reference is either direct (*de re*) or mediated (*de dicto*).<sup>2</sup> The difference is that *de dicto* reference denotes something in a guise of my prior beliefs, theories, and assumptions, while *de re* reference denotes things independently of my further beliefs about it. Linguistically, *de dicto* reference involves a pairing between a propositional attitude and a proposition (e.g., “I believe that there are rocks on Mars”), while *de re* reference involves a pairing between the attitude and the object bereft of any accompanying proposition (e.g., “I believe in witches”). I assume that mental types of referring activity function in a way that structurally resembles that distinction.

As goes reference, so goes self-reference – the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* holds for self-referring acts, too. When I say, ‘me’, I might be talking about the knowing subject that has certain continuous and characteristic beliefs, or I might be talking about the knowing subject regardless of my beliefs about them. “I am thinking a thought” (*de re*) and “I am thinking that I am having a thought” (*de dicto*) are introspectively distinct referring activities, where the former refers to an accomplishment, while the latter involves self-recognition in doing the accomplishment.

*De re* self-reference denotes a knowing self that is independent of conceptual beliefs about one’s own character, and hence it must acknowledge the possibility of a self that is inaccessible to immediate experience. That entails notions of a deep self, complete with notions of the unconscious mind, which are in some appreciable sense independent of one’s conscious beliefs. But the fact that it appeals to unconscious beliefs makes it a rationally untenable argumentative strategy, as it implies a divided self. It follows that, from this point of view, solipsism is false. For solipsism holds that there is at least and at most one person who exists; and if there is a divided self, then there is *less than* one person. Hence the aspiring solipsist needs to make use of *de dicto* self-reference.

There is a distinction between two kinds of solipsism: the solipsism of the present moment and the solipsism of the long-haul.<sup>3</sup> However, mediated self-reference demands reference to a knowing self that is exhausted by the present moment. For one may only *de dicto* refer to oneself in the long-haul only on the assumption that their beliefs never change. Yet it is irrational to believe that one’s beliefs do not change in the long-haul. It is only mooted when one considers oneself in the present moment.

*De dicto* self-reference is reference to oneself under the guise of a proposition. That is to say, when speaking of any proposition prefixed by an attitude – e.g., “I think there are rocks on Mars” -- both subject and the bearer of the predicate denote the knowing self; it’s just that the predicate, ‘rocks on Mars,’ is a more elliptical way of ultimately referring to themselves. (Lest we forget that the solipsist is an oddball.) Yet *de dicto* self-reference attributes an intension that relates

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<sup>2</sup> Self-reference is often called *de se* reference, and theorists have wondered how *de se* reference relates to the other referential forms. David Lewis argues that *de se* attitudes are sometimes *de dicto* attitudes, and at other times latch on to non-propositional contents (i.e., properties in the real world, perhaps more properly styled *de re* contents).

See: Lewis, David K. 1979. “Attitudes De Dicto and De Se.” *The Philosophical Review* 88(4) (Oct. 1979). pp.513-543.

Yet one could imagine situations where *de re* attitudes express *contentless states*, owing to the lack of a referent. But in the context of the current argument that would imply nihilism, so one must assume that the solipsist is willing to grant the existence of propositional attitudes more or less as they are reflected in experience. But for pertinent discussion, see:

Bernecker, Sven. 2000. “Knowing the World by Knowing One’s Own Mind.” *Synthese* 123 p.1-34.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Solipsism of the present moment’ is George Santayana’s phrase. For more on Santayana’s views, see: Davis, Joe Lee. 1972. “Santayana and Solipsism.” *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Summer.

the knowing subject and bearer of the predicate, such that the two are identical for the moment, but not necessarily or always; the solipsist does not need to think that the description of Mars describes themselves, though both involve self-reference in one fashion or another. In this respect, *de dicto* self-reference it is unlike *de re* self-reference, which has no need for the attribution of identity under a guise.

So long as a denoted subject and the denoted bearer of the predicate are identical under a guise for the present moment, they must also be at least possibly unidentical to each other on some other occasions. After all, if subject and predicate were necessarily the same always, then it would be solipsism of the long-haul; but we already saw that this is wrong. Hence, *de dicto* self-reference implies (at best) a relationship of contingent identity between the subject and bearer of the predicate, and (at worst) no true identity at all. But the solipsist is a metaphysician. So, the solipsist must be a believer in contingent identity in some serious metaphysical sense, a sense that claims to be veridical.

## 2. Metaphysics

Metaphysics is the study the nature of reality or existence, broadly speaking. There is no reason whatsoever to think that metaphysics is properly done by reasoning about possible worlds *simpliciter*, since the point of metaphysics is to examine the nature of reality. To study reality is to study actual worlds so far as they contrast with imaginary or counterfactual ones.

Contingent identity claims are concerned with modal expressions only insofar as they relate to facts about reality. When making claims about what is real, one is at least pretending to make claims about propositions that are true to at least some of the facts in some actual worlds and at some times; and if one wishes to make metaphysical claims, they must be talking about some commonality between all actual worlds. In other words, when I talk about features of reality as such, I have to be talking about what holds true across the set of all actual worlds (actual possibles). It is important, however, to not overshoot the mark and concern oneself only with all possible worlds (possible actuals), since metaphysics is concerned only with the facts about what is really necessary: i.e., what is true to at least some of the facts in every *actually* possible world.

When we talk about the plurality of ‘actual worlds’, it is just a way of speaking about the procession of time in the real world. The world today differs from the world of yesterday, and the world of 10,000 years ago; each of these worlds are different, each constituted by a wholly different set of facts. Yet all of them are actual worlds connected in a causal chain. In contrast, counterfactuals are connected to actual worlds by resemblance, and not because they are causally connected.<sup>4</sup>

The solipsist of the present moment is obliged to conceive of their situation in terms of actual worlds, so long as they are committed to a serious metaphysical position. And on first glance, there is no problem with that. For the solipsist may believe that their beliefs about themselves are different from those they had yesterday and the ones they will have tomorrow. They will only need to insist that the present beliefs are the veridical ones, while the past and future are counterfactual.

Yet, on second blush, they cannot get away with this. For beliefs about counterfactuals are not interesting to a student of metaphysics, understood as the study of actual worlds and not

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<sup>4</sup> Sure, the fact that actual worlds are sometimes very closely connected with nearby counterfactuals is a source of continuous wonderment and inspires epistemological puzzles, but these puzzles have nothing in principle to do with the nature of reality, which is exhausted by what is actual.

imaginary ones. On this view of metaphysics, any justifiable assertion of metaphysically contingent self-identity implies two things. First, since the identity is merely contingent, there is a possible world where the knowing subject is not the same as the knowing subject that is under the description – i.e., where other people apparently exist. And second, one must assume that this possible world is an actual world and not a merely counterfactual one, so far as metaphysics is concerned. All false beliefs are those whose falseness is a near-miss, referring to a state of affairs in an actual world, albeit not the actual world that is happening right now.

All false beliefs that issue as a valid consequence of a metaphysical theory can only be acknowledged as near-miss cases. Counterfactual worlds are not a part of a metaphysical theory, in this sense – they are merely *epistemological* posits that help us come to grips with theories of the real world. Yet these non-actual worlds do not bear on the essential project of studying the nature of the real and the veridical, the actual world(s), the worlds where our claims answer to facts about causality and consequence. Errors in judgment happen, but the fact of our fallibility has no bearing on the nature of reality.<sup>5</sup> So, when a metaphysical solipsist takes their project seriously qua metaphysician, they will have to formulate an account that honors the *referential successes of both their correct statements and incorrect ones*. The only way they can do so is by arguing that their false beliefs refer to actual worlds dislocated from the present moment.

But if this is the best account of solipsism we have, then it is enough to refute solipsism *simpliciter*. Metaphysical *de dicto* reference, and solipsism of the present moment, implicate beliefs where the predicate of judgment is apparently not identical to the knowing subject. And, in a proper metaphysical theory, where the predicate of judgment is apparently not the same as the knowing subject, then it is simply not the same as the knowing subject at all; the study of the appearances belongs to epistemology, not to metaphysics. It follows that the solipsist of the present moment must believe that there is an actual world where other people exist -- though perhaps that time has not yet come, or whose time has passed. But in either case, the existence of others has been acknowledged.

So, solipsism *simpliciter* is false. There is no problem of other minds.

### 3 Objections

Suppose I consider the possibility that I am being deceived in my commonsense realist intuitions, and that I am the only one who exists. Cartesian skepticism seems like a coherent research program. But if the foregoing argument is correct, then the first step in the *Meditations* must be deeply confused. What, exactly, is wrong with it, according to the above argument?

It depends entirely on how one wishes to interpret Descartes. The *Meditations* did not seem to delve very deeply into the analysis and explication of the notion of the first-person plural *as a referent*, which means one ought to hesitate before using that language. Instead, the Cartesian prefers to say that since the existence of the knowing subject is something both clear and distinct to introspection, and is indubitable in this way, then that means the knowing subject is *presented* before the mind. One might then infer that the Cartesian project would have us believe it is not *represented* (and, hence, not capable of being misrepresented); and so, there is no basis for ascribing it with a kind of rule-like normativity ostensibly implied by the notion of reference.

Another way to salvage the idea of indubitability is by appealing to resemblances. Perhaps, one might say, the self is continually presented to experience in such a way that each presentation

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, for realist metaphysicians, not even beliefs matter to metaphysics. Beliefs, however, do matter to the solipsist as part of their reality, since they make use of *de dicto* self-reference.

resembles the last. If we jettison the role of reference in discussion of the knowing subject, then we will have to take up a more old-fashioned empiricist language of qualitative similarity. So, in “I doubt therefore I am”, the first “I” may be sufficiently similar to the second “I” that their correlation is indubitable. That said, there is information lost between the two “I”s; for, by stipulation, the knowing subject behind the first “I” was not meta-thinking, while the second “I” was, and so they are dissimilar in a respect. We are entitled to be indifferent to that difference, so long as the outcome is clear and distinct. What is not clear and distinct is that, in the sentence “I think there are rocks on Mars”, the predicate ‘rocks on Mars’ resembles the knowing subject. So, it must be reference after all.

A second set of worries come from anti-Cartesians. For instance, Elizabeth Anscombe famously denies that “I” is a referring term.<sup>6</sup> Yet Anscombe was eager to show that solipsism is false or worse. So, the conclusion of this paper is unaltered.

Lucy O’Brien developed a rich and formidable take inspired by Anscombe’s gambit, and it would be a gross mistake to overlook it. O’Brien takes the view that self-ascribed actions are immune to error through misidentification -- that “I” always picks out the person who makes the first-person report. On O’Brien’s view, this is best explained by a *non-perceptual and non-conceptual* capacity to engage in agent awareness. I am willing to grant for the sake of argument that such awareness is a genuine active faculty (perhaps like a Kantian intuition) and not just a quasi-perceptual datum or theoretical construct. On face value, that would put us in the *de re* self-reference camp, complete with its attendant problems.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, for O’Brien, first-personal reference must be *de re*, since we can refer to ourselves in states of amnesia. Such an austere sense of self-reference provides no defense against ascriptions of the divided self, unfortunately. Still, putting that aside, suppose for argument’s sake that one need not be able to identify themselves in order to self-refer.<sup>8</sup> Even so, it would be of no help to the metaphysical solipsist, who must be able to richly self-refer so long as they are trying to give their best shot to a metaphysical argument.

A third objection might be formed against the use of possible worlds semantics, as opposed to propositional calculus. So, one might say that if you are not willing to make use of possible worlds semantics in doing metaphysics, then the rest of what I have to say will not obviously follow. It is hard to see what would motivate such a thing: usual worries with ‘possible worlds’ is that they lose a ‘feeling for reality’, so to speak, but my argument above takes rather severe pains to limit metaphysics to the study of actually possible worlds. One doubts whether a merely extensional language is capable of doing metaphysics at all.

One final objection: even if my account is right, the metaphysical solipsist might be able to get away with their views by just never, *in fact*, thinking about other people, ever. If the thought of people never arises, then they are not on the hook for metaphysical commitments. I grant this as a limiting condition on the account I have provided. It is the only sense in which there might be a problem of other minds: i.e., if it is imposed by mental fiat. But such inattentiveness is not of interest to a metaphysics based on reasons.

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<sup>6</sup> This was probably an overstatement, as the point can be made more carefully in a few different ways.

See: O’Brien, Lucy. 2007. *Self-Knowing Agents*. Oxford:Oxford UP, 2007; and

Perry, John & Simon Blackburn. 1986. “Thought without Representation.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society: Supplementary Volumes* 60.

It is also worth looking at O’Brien’s probing examination of some solipsistic hazards one might encounter when trying to make use of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. See:

O’Brien, L. F. (1996), ‘Solipsism and Self-Reference’, *European Journal of Philosophy* 4:175-194.

<sup>7</sup> For commentary: Shoemaker, Sydney. 2009. “Review of *Self-Knowing Agents*.” *The Philosophical Quarterly*. 59(237) (Oct. 2009).

<sup>8</sup> O’Brien uses a different vocabulary to describe these points.

## Conclusion

I have argued that the fate of metaphysical solipsism *simpliciter* rests on the fate of *de dicto* self-reference conjoined with a solipsism of the present moment. I argued that any metaphysical account of this view has got to assert contingent identity between the knowing subject and propositions known. But, as a metaphysical project, it must also be afflicted by a certain hubris – its sense of correct and incorrect judgment must track all and only worlds that are actually possible. It is in considering these counter-contemporary states that the existence of other people is established.

Anyway. Even if you accept the foregoing argument, then, to be sure, the resulting philosophy is still barren. For instance, it leaves open the possibility that I am contingently alone in the actual world right now. It sure feels like it, sometimes. But that is not a thesis about the nature of reality, so not interesting to a metaphysical project.