Solipsism and Subjectivity

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Is my having consciousness a fact of experience?[1]

. . . Consciousness in itself is nothing empirical.[2]

I. A Picture of Subjectivity

How should we represent the place occupied by human subjectivity in the overall order of things? How, even if only provisionally and naively, are we to plot the limits of inner space, say, or draw the dividing line between those things that exist or obtain in the objective world, as against those which do not, but which are to be characterized rather as genuinely subjective?

Perhaps the most compelling and widespread pre-theoretical response to questions like these begins with a rough and ready distinction between, on the one hand, items we typically call 'inner', 'private', 'subjective' or 'mental' (such as sensations, moods, memories, thoughts, emotions and the like) and, on the other hand, what we think of as 'objective', 'public', 'external', 'independent' things (such as electrons, human bodies, and galaxies).[3] If this were right, then one major philosophical task facing us would be that of clarifying and explaining what, if anything, this distinction consists in. In post-Cartesian philosophy, at any rate, this has been the territory over which dualists, idealists, neutral monists, materialists, and behaviourists, amongst others, have fought for control.

Of the elements which together comprise the Cartesian legacy in philosophy, one of the most central is the vision it presents of our subjective states and the knowledge we have of them. Indeed, as Myles Burnyeat has suggested, it is with Descartes that there emerges for the first time the claim that one's subjective states are not merely things undergone or suffered, but are items of which genuine, objective *knowledge* is possible. It is with Descartes, in other words, that we first encounter the application of the notion of *truth* within the subjective realm: 'The addition of truth is what opens up [subjectivity as] a new realm for substantial knowledge', and this involves construing 'one's own experience as an object for description like any other'.[4]

Now most of us are familiar with the properties supposedly possessed by the denizens of this 'new realm'. Such items can be referred to and described; assertions can be made about them that are objectively true or false; they are

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given immediately to the subject, by whom they are incorrigibly knowable; they exist and possess all their intrinsic properties independently of any facts concerning the external world (including facts about the body of the subject); they are unshareable, in the sense that no two distinct minds can *have* one and the same content of consciousness; and they are private, at least in this sense: another person cannot have *that* knowledge of them which is enjoyed by the subject whose contents of consciousness they are. With this picture in place, moreover, there are two further consequences which can come to seem intuitively inescapable. The first is that the mind, in Descartes' words, 'is better known than the body'[5] – indeed, it seems to follow that one's own mind is more certainly known than anything else whatsoever, including external objects, other minds, the past, the causal nexus, the laws of science, and so forth: 'Nothing is more easily or manifestly perceptible to me than my own mind'.[6] Within this framework, in other words, it is *the very possibility of objectivity* that becomes problematic, that is open to challenge and, hence, in need of investigation and defence. One's own subjectivity, in contrast, is simply *there*, an immediate and intrinsically unproblematic datum. The second commitment which has seemed to many to be involved in this vision of the mind and its contents is this: that subjective things are ontologically dependent things. Sensations, memories, desires, feelings and the like essentially require an owner or subject who *has* them. There cannot exist a pain or an emotion, it is claimed, that isn't someone's pain or emotion.

This, then, is the picture of the mind and its place in nature which Wittgenstein was concerned throughout his life to subvert. He rejected it as a whole, and he rejected every specific element within it. In general terms, that is, he found it pernicious in the distortions it produces in the understanding each of us has of ourselves, our relations with each other, and of our place in the world. And in detail he found it shot through with falsity, triviality, incoherence, and confusion. In his later writings, for example, he rejects the following claims: that knowledge of one's own subjectivity is possible;[7] that one's own states of consciousness are given immediately and undubitably;[8] that notions like *reference, truth, object, process, identity, description* and *assertion* apply to consciousness in anything like the ways in which they apply to items in the material world;[9] that one's relation to one's own contents of consciousness is essentially a cognitive relation;[10] that knowledge of another's subjectivity is essentially problematic;[11] that the relation between a person's states of consciousness and his or her bodily behaviour is an external or contingent relation;[12] and that the world contains two realms, the 'inner' world of the mind, and the 'outer' world of objective reality.[13]

Wittgenstein's thought is not, however, merely critical or negative; for he articulates a radically different vision with which to replace the Cartesian one. In what follows I shall try to characterize some of the salient features of this vision. Perhaps (to anticipate) its most central feature is this: genuine subjectivity is not something that, as it were, *has* a place in nature; my own consciousness is not something I ever come across *in* the world; it is not the sort of thing that I can

refer to, identify, describe, have acquaintance with, or knowledge of. And its elements are not any kind of 'things' – whether events, processes, objects, properties, or facts. Subjectivity, according to Wittgenstein is more pervasive, and far more important than anything of *that* kind. Genuine subjectivity – perhaps this ought not to surprise us – is that to which the entire conceptual machinery of objectivity is ultimately inapplicable. This, I shall suggest, is a constant theme of Wittgenstein's thought, and one that characterizes equally not only his early solipsism, but also his later concerns in the private language argument and elsewhere in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

II. Anti-solipsistic Prejudice

At first sight it seems beyond reasonable doubt that in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein endorses some version of solipsism.[14] The text is, after all, quite as clear and explicit on this matter as it is on most others. Not only are we told unequivocally that 'the world is *my* world' (5.62), and that indeed 'I am my world' (5.63), but we are also informed that what the solipsist wants to say is 'entirely correct' (*ganz richtig*) (5.62).[15] Commitment to solipsism is further reinforced by the assertion that 'at death the world does not alter, but comes to an end' (6.431) – as indeed it must if, as Wittgenstein also claims, 'the world and life are one' (5.621), and the self is 'a limit of the world' (5.632). Further evidence of Wittgenstein's solipsism is to be found in his early notebooks: 'As my idea is the world', he writes there, 'so my will is the world-will' (17.10.16). And at one point he exclaims: 'What has history to do with me? Mine is the first and only world' (2.9.16).[16]

From 'the world is my world' and 'I am my world', it follows by the transitivity of identity that *I am the world*. Although its meaning must at this point remain something of a mystery, I shall take this last claim to epitomize Wittgenstein's solipsism: his central metaphysical claim is that the self and the world are, in the last analysis, one and the same.

Confronted by remarks such as these, readers of Wittgenstein's early works face an uncomfortable dilemma; for there are two principles governing how such texts should be read which come into apparent conflict at this point. On the one hand there is what we might call the principle of literalness: if a text contains the assertion that p, then, other things being equal, this comprises good evidence for the ascription to the author of the belief that p. On the other hand, however, there is the principle of interpretative charity, namely that wherever possible we refrain from attributing to an author doctrines and claims that are manifestly false, obviously incoherent, or just downright silly. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given the virtually unanimous opinion amongst contemporary philosophers that solipsism is indeed either manifestly false, obviously incoherent, or downright silly, the majority of commentators on the *Tractatus* have been, as it seems to them, charitable, and have accordingly concluded that Wittgenstein wasn't *really*

a solipsist at all. But charity in this context is misplaced. And the best way to show this is to demonstrate that, in spite of admittedly strong appearances to the contrary, metaphysical solipsism does deserve to be taken seriously.

As a first step towards combating anti-solipsistic prejudice, we can introduce three initial demands on any acceptable form of solipsistic theory. The first such demand I shall call *the Franklin requirement*, after Mrs Christine Ladd Franklin who (with the possible exception of Kant) was the first to formulate it. The requirement is simply this: to be acceptable, a solipsistic theory must neither assert nor imply any empirical falsehood.[17]

Some background is needed here. Perhaps the single most insurmountable obstacle to face an advocate of solipsism is the widespread belief that the very act of advocating solipsism is itself somehow self-defeating. This prejudice usually takes the form of the tired old gibe about the solipsist having no one to talk to, and no reason to advance his or her theory. D. W. Hamlyn is typical: 'It is of course a fair question', he writes, 'why anyone who believed it should want to insist on saying it, since there could, on his own thesis, be no one there to listen to him.'[18] What lies at the root of this response is not any perceived inadequacy or inconsistency in what the solipsist *says*. On the contrary, indeed, this response is often coupled with the claim that solipsism is strictly speaking irrefutable. What lies behind it is, rather, the belief that there will always be a discrepancy between what the solipsist says and what he or she *does*. One classical expression of this view is Russell's:

> Solipsism is the view that I alone exist. This is a view which it is hard to refute, but even harder to believe. I once received a letter from a philosopher who professed to be a solipsist, but who was surprised that there were no others. Yet this philosopher was by way of believing that no one else existed. This shows that solipsism is not really believed even by those convinced of its truth.[19]

The same *ad hominem* dismissal of the solipsist is expressed – though this time rather more trenchantly – by Schopenhauer. Solipsism, he declared

> can never, of course, be demonstrably refuted. Yet in philosophy it has never been used other than as a sceptical sophism, i.e., a pretence. As a serious conviction, on the other hand, it could only be found in a madhouse, and as such stands in need, not of a refutation, but of a cure. Therefore we need go into it no further.[20]

The point is this. The impossibility of a sane person's sincerely believing that solipsism is true is shown by the fact that such a person will inevitably act in ways inconsistent with such a belief. They may dine, play backgammon, and be merry with their friends – at the very least they will act in ways that clearly indicate their acknowledgement of the existence of others. So the choice is stark: either the solipsist is insane or insincere, mad or mendacious.

There are various cogent objections to this line of thought, but I shall pursue none of them here. Rather, for the sake of argument, I shall simply concede the point in its entirety. In other words, I shall take it as an unconditional requirement on the acceptability of any solipsistic theory that it be, at the very minimum, compatible with all normal forms of behaviour. So there must be nothing wrong with a solipsist's talking to other people, playing backgammon, writing books, or even organizing conferences which other solipsists are invited to attend. This requirement can indeed be strengthened, for in the last analysis it is not the compatibility of solipsism with certain forms of behaviour, as such, that is relevant here, but rather the compatibility of that doctrine with the empirical facts whose existence is presupposed in any claim that such forms of behaviour are rational.

Now Russell's anecdotal dismissal of solipsism (quoted above) was in fact provoked by a letter he received from Christine Ladd Franklin. The nature of this correspondence has, I think, been widely misunderstood. I have heard it said, for example, that Mrs Ladd Franklin was one of the first to see the comic inconsistency involved in advocating solipsism; and Miss Anscombe seems to be of this view, for she writes that it is possible that the letter's 'comic effect was intentional', and the joke therefore at Russell's expense.[21] And David Pears has recently referred dismissively to the 'mistake' made by the author of that letter.[22] In fact, however, Mrs Ladd Franklin was neither joking nor mistaken. 'Solipsism', she wrote to Russell, 'is simply a description of the incontrovertible facts of experience . . . I am myself the sole (so far as I can make out) Solipsist, but I am also a Hypothetical Realist. Don't you see at once that this is the only logical position?'[23] Not only is her advocacy of solipsism without irony or comic intent, it is also sophisticated enough to incorporate the requirement that the theory be entirely compatible with 'the incontrovertible facts of experience'. The Franklin requirement, then, is this: to be acceptable, solipsism must be *fact-preserving*. (How facts can be preserved is the topic of section IV, below.)

The second initial demand that I shall make is unproblematic. It is that solipsism be internally consistent. Now if, as was claimed earlier, a certain form of solipsism requires commitment to the claim that the world and the self are identical, that *I am the world*, then it follows that for a solipsist of that sort the world can contain as a proper part no entity designated by such expressions as 'I', 'myself', 'my ego', and the like, as they occur in statements of the theory. For if the world contained me as a proper part it could not be identical with me. So, if we are to avoid both empirical falsity and internal incoherence, we must deny that such expressions as 'I', 'me', 'myself' and the like refer, in the context of the theory, to that empirically encounterable, spatio-temporal, psycho-physical entity called David Bell. For in *that* sense, I, David Bell, am certainly a part, a proper part, and a very small part indeed, of reality as a whole. In the present context, then, the appropriate conception of the self is rather that of the locus of subjectivity, the owner of experience, or the subject of consciousness. Kant calls it 'this I, or he, or it (the thing) which thinks'; and Wittgenstein: 'the subject that thinks or entertains ideas'. And that the world contains no such thing is a

necessary condition of the possibility of a coherent metaphysical solipsism. Wittgenstein expressed this denial in a number of ways, for example:

> There is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas. (5.631)
>
> The subject does not belong to the world; rather it is a limit of the world. (5.632)
>
> 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. (5.641).

The third requirement is, again, uncontroversial. It is that solipsism should be *philosophically* interesting. A theory which successfully avoided both empirical falsity and logical incoherence, but which remained ultimately a mere idle conundrum or curiosity would therewith remain philosophically inadequate and unacceptable. Solipsism may be bizarre; but if it can be shown to be consistent, compatible with the facts, and philosophically interesting, then it surely cannot be rejected out of hand.

III. Self-effacing Solipsism

I hinted earlier that one family of problems to which metaphysical solipsism centrally addresses itself as both the diagnosis and the solution concerns the character and the limits of human subjectivity. It concerns, that is, where and how (and indeed whether) we should draw a line between things that are objective and those that are subjective. In this connection we can usefully follow Mrs Ladd Franklin and ask: What *are* the incontrovertible facts of experience? How does the supposed distinction between the 'inner world' and the 'outer world' strike us? What is it like to be a being possessed of subjectivity? William James attempted to map out the terrain in the following delightful passage:

> The human race as a whole largely agrees as to what it shall notice and name, and what not. And among the noticed parts we select in much the same way for accentuation and preference, or subordination and dislike. There is, however, one entirely extraordinary case in which no two men are ever known to choose alike. One great splitting of the whole universe into two halves is made by each of us; and for each of us almost all the interest attaches to one of the halves; but we draw the division between them in a different place. When I say that we all call the two halves by the same names, and that those names are 'me' and 'not-me', it will at once be seen what I mean. . . . [For each person] the neighbour's me falls together with all the rest of things in one foreign mass, against which his own me stands out in startling relief.[24]

Now as a description of the incontrovertible facts of experience, this is just false. Or at least – I can honestly report – *my* world isn't anything like *that*. The universe I inhabit, while it indeed manifests virtually endless variety, is nevertheless one, single universe. It is simply not split into two radically different sorts of realm; it does not contain entities belonging to two metaphysically different kinds; and my own 'me' does not 'stand out in startling relief'. Wittgenstein expresses his dissension from any such view as this tersely: 'All experience is world', he writes, 'and does not need the subject.'[25]

We might amplify Wittgenstein's thought as follows. Metaphysical solipsism is the doctrine that I am the world or, in James' terms, that the 'me' and the 'not-me', far from comprising 'one great splitting of the whole universe', are in fact indistinguishable one from the other. Now as an identity statement, the claim that I am the world can be read, so to speak, in either direction. Read from right to left, it identifies the world in its entirety with ME – and that certainly sounds immodest. Solipsism has, however, virtually always been construed in this way: it is, we are told, the doctrine that only I exist. The insight that underlies the solipsism of the *Tractatus*, however, is that the statement of identity is best read from left to right. In which case (to put it for the moment more picturesquely than precisely) it is I who disappear, leaving behind just: THE WORLD. We might call this self-effacing solipsism:

> Here it can be seen that solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism. The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it. (5.64)

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein contemplates the contents of a supposedly solipsistic work, entitled *The World as I found it*. In such a work, he claims,

> I should have to include a report on my body, and should have to say which parts were subordinate to my will . . . this being a method of isolating the subject, or rather of showing that in an important sense there is no subject; for it alone could *not* be mentioned in that book. (5.631)

Now one point suggested by these observations is this: the contents of an avowedly solipsistic work, *The World as I found it* (assuming it is accurate) cannot differ in principle from the contents of a work of purest realism – it might be called *The World as it Really is in and of Itself*. If both are accurate, they cannot disagree about what is the case: neither can contain assertions or refer to entities inaccessible to the other. Now the world as *I* find it contains, amongst other things, London as the capital of England, water composed of H_2O, and my suffering stomach ache on the morning of Thursday, January 26th, 1966. And, if one of us isn't guilty of omission or error, the realist and I must agree on all these facts. *Subjectivity* seems to have eluded us both. Reality no longer consists of an

objective, public, accessible part, set over against my private, subjective, inner world; the world, the real world, we might say, is just the totality of facts, it is *everything* that is the case. And, objectively speaking, what is the case includes my own and everyone else's psychological states, mental contents, and the like. These are things that actually occur and obtain; objectively true assertions can be made about them; they can be described, referred to, and known.

Wittgenstein's claim that 'solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism' can perhaps best be amplified as follows. 'Realism' in this context is to be understood in its traditional sense, as the metaphysical doctrine that the world depends neither for its existence nor its nature on its being perceived, conceived, or experienced in any way. Pure realism, in other words, can be identified with the thesis that the proper concept of reality is that of 'reality as it is in itself' – where the last phrase is intended to indicate ontological autonomy or independent existence. Metaphysical solipsism and pure realism coincide, then, because precisely *that* concept of reality is common to both of them. For the self-effacing solipsist the world is just the totality of facts, every one of which is entirely objective, ontologically autonomous, and 'unowned'. No objective fact depends for its existence on there being awareness of it; and there are no 'subjective facts'. Indeed, on this view the phrase 'subjective fact' is a contradiction in terms.

What is perhaps not clear, however, is the sense in which this concept of reality can yet remain a solipsistic one. What sense can we make of the suggestion that such a world is nevertheless *mine*, or that I am identical with it?

The first point to note is merely formal, namely that the ontological autonomy of the world is in no way threatened by the metaphysical solipsist's identification of that world with the self. For to say of something that it depends on itself is not to deny its independence; and to say that it depends *only* on itself is, precisely, to assert its independence. The autonomy that pure realism ascribes to the world is necessarily compatible with the strict identity of that world with anything that is itself ontologically autonomous. And in this way self-effacing solipsism can coincide with pure realism, without thereby relinquishing its claim to be at the same time a genuine and full-blooded form of solipsism. The world in itself is quite as independent as the pure realist maintains; but that acknowledgement is compatible with the claim that, nevertheless, the world and my subjectivity are ultimately indistinguishable. We now need to give some substance and plausibility to that last assertion.

IV. Preserving the Facts

There are certain questions of the form: 'What would the world be like if such-and-such were the case?' to which the correct answer is: 'The world would be exactly as it is'.[26] What would the world be like, Russell once asked, had it been created *ex nihilo* a mere five minutes ago – yet created in such a way as to contain

all the apparent traces of a more distant past which it does in fact contain, including all our apparent memories? The answer, Russell suggests, is that nothing in the world would change; everything would remain exactly as it is. Or again, with Leibniz, we might ask: What would the world be like if every left-right spatial relation within it were instantaneously and simultaneously reversed? According to Leibniz: 'these two conditions, the one as things are, the other supposed the other way round, would not differ from one another. . . . In truth the one would be just the same as the other, as they are absolutely indiscernible.'[27]

Questions of the form 'What would the world be like if such-and-such were the case?' that are correctly to be answered: 'The world would be as it is', I shall call *fact-preserving questions*. In spite of their counterfactual form they offer no discernible alternative to the way things actually are. Now, speaking quite generally, if there is a question to which we possess the correct answer, then we are in a position to make the corresponding true assertion. Of course, as philosophers possessed of a robust sense of reality have reminded us, merely because some bizarre hypothesis happens to be compatible with all the facts, this as yet gives us no reason to believe that the hypothesis is true. It is surely pure lunacy to believe we actually inhabit a universe that is just five minutes old, and which flips in and out of its mirror image every few seconds. Quite so. But that merely shows that the true assertion which corresponds to a fact-preserving question (*What would the world be like if such-and-such were the case?*) is not one of the form: *Such-and-such really is the case*. One form of assertion which, however, is justified can be expressed schematically as follows: the world, that is the actual world, can be re-described without remainder or loss by employing such-and-such principles of description. So we are not here concerned with descriptions of other possible worlds, but rather with other possible descriptions of this, the actual world.

To the extent that our language is arbitrary or conventional, to that extent it should be possible to envisage (i.e. invent) alternative ways of talking which, although employing different syntactic and/or semantic rules, nevertheless possess the same expressive power as the language we normally use. Such an alternative notation will be just that: another way of saying the same things. The claim is not, therefore, that an alternative form of description will have any *practical* advantage over normal ways of talking; and in particular there is no suggestion that we should forsake those everyday forms of speech and in practice adopt those of the fact-preserving alternative. As I hope to indicate, the advantages of considering an alternative mode of description will turn out to be essentially *philosophical*.[28] In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein writes:

> A particular mode of signifying may be unimportant, but it is always important that it is a *possible* mode of signifying. And that is generally so in philosophy: again and again the individual case turns out to be unimportant, but the possibility of each individual case discloses something about the essence of the world. (3.3421)

This remark is itself intended as an indirect comment on an earlier pair of remarks:

> A proposition possesses essential and accidental features.
> Accidental features are those that result from the particular way in which the propositional sign is produced. Essential features are those without which the proposition could not express its sense. (3.34)
>
> So what is essential in a proposition is what all propositions that can express the same sense have in common.
> And similarly, in general, what is essential in a symbol is what all symbols that can serve the same purpose have in common. (3.341)

The *Tractatus* view that the possibility of a certain symbolism discloses something about the essence of the world is echoed in the *Investigations*, in the statement that '*Essence* is expressed by grammar'.[29] And the implication is that we can discover what is grammatically essential, what is not merely arbitrary, conventional or contingent, by examining alternative notations that can nevertheless 'serve the same purpose'. What is essential is what all such notations have in common, and what is grammatically accidental is what an alternative notation can lack.

Now if, as Wittgenstein suggests, 'all experience is world, and does not need the subject', then as he himself subsequently observed: 'What the solipsist wants is not a notation in which the ego has monopoly, but one in which the ego vanishes.'[30] The rudiments of such an alternative, solipsistic notation are presented in Wittgenstein's parable of the oriental despot.[31] We are asked to imagine a despotic state whose ruler is a solipsist who imposes on his subjects his own preferred, solipsistic way of conceiving things. For the despot who is the unique centre of this language there is no need to identify anything as the bearer, owner, or subject of any states of consciousness of which he is aware. Accordingly he expels from his language any terms that might mistakenly be taken to refer to any such thing, and which have no other valid function. When he is in pain he says 'There is pain', rather than 'I have a pain'. When he has a thought he says 'It thinks', rather than 'I think' – and here, familiarly, the impersonal pronoun is to be understood as in such constructions as 'It is raining', and 'It is time to go'.[32] The philosophically less fortunate subjects, on the other hand, are to adopt a quite different way of speaking. When one of them is in pain (or is thinking) the others say: 'So-and-so is behaving as the Centre does when there is pain (or when it thinks).' The subjects, unlike the despot at the centre, can of course use the first person pronoun: one of them might call out 'I behave as the centre does when there is pain!' – when, for example, he hits his thumb with a hammer.

The subjects of this despotic state can (as *we* would say) talk about their own states of consciousness, about another's states of consciousness, and about the states of consciousness of the Centre. And conversely (though again as *we*

would say) the Centre can talk both about his own states of consciousness and about those of his subjects. That he refers to himself 'externally', so to speak, *as* the Centre, reflects the fact that his knowledge of his own body and behaviour is on all fours with his knowledge of another's body and behaviour. For the solipsist, in other words, far from its being the case that 'his own me stands out in startling relief', it is rather that the self shrinks to a point without extension, leaving behind only the reality co-ordinated with it.

But in exactly what sense would a language of the kind we are envisaging be *solipsistic*? Well, clearly, it would be solipsistic for only one person – the person who is the Centre. And fully to appreciate the difference between our normal way of talking and the new one we must put ourselves into that position. If I am the Centre, what do I find? Amongst other things, the world as I find it contains thoughts, feelings of misery and happiness, sensations, perceptions, desires, and the like. Some of these will indeed be contingently related to a particular body called 'the Centre' – but then again, some of them will be contingently related to ambient temperature, say, or the presence of food, or the fortunes of Sheffield Wednesday. In addition to thoughts, feelings, sensations and the like, which are events in the world, there will also be such things as football matches, hurricanes, and eclipses of the sun. And these too are events in the world. For me, as the Centre, *none* of these occurrences involves any identification of an owner, or bearer, or subject who has them. From this new perspective a hurricane is just as little, or just as much, 'mine' as is a headache. With the disappearance of the I as the owner or subject of consciousness, and with mental events and other psychological phenomena construed as things that happen or exist in the objective world, the self-effacing solipsist can consistently maintain that there is no distinction to be drawn between items that are 'subjective' and those that are 'objective'. Whatever those terms precisely mean, they now characterize the world as whole, and not any particular part or aspect of it.

V. Subjectivity and Individuation

I earlier took the slogan 'I am the world' to express a central aspect of Wittgenstein's solipsistic point of view. We now need to examine more closely what might be intended by someone for whom such a mode of expression is metaphysically appropriate. It will be useful to begin by trying to take the expression as literally as possible.

If I am the world, then the conditions on my identity must coincide with those on reality as a whole: whatever it is that individuates me as a locus of genuine subjectivity, whatever makes me unique as a subject of consciousness, must be indistinguishable from whatever it is in virtue of which this world, *the* world, is itself unique. Can we make sense of this idea? Perhaps the following remarks will prove helpful: they occur in Wittgenstein's early notebooks, and seem

(however obscurely) to concern the uniqueness of the objective world and how this is related to the uniqueness of one's subjectivity:

> The world and life are one. Physiological life is of course not 'life'. And neither is psychological life. Life is the world. (24.7.16)
>
> Only from the consciousness of the *uniqueness of my life* arises religion – science – and art. And this consciousness is life itself. (1.8.16)
>
> Now is it true . . . that my character is expressed only in the build of *my* body and brain, and not equally in the build of the whole of the rest of the world? This contains a salient point.
>
> This is the way I have travelled: Idealism singles men out from the world as unique, solipsism singles me out alone, and at last I see that I too belong with the rest of the world, and so on the one side *nothing* is left over, and on the other side, as unique, *the world*. (15.10.16)
>
> Is not *my world* adequate for individuation? (19.11.16)

The overall context in which these remarks occur is one where Wittgenstein is exploring, and eventually dissociating himself from, an explicitly Schopenhauerian approach to individuality and individuation. Now Schopenhauer had himself addressed what he called 'the riddle of subjectivity'. As long as we restrict ourselves to consideration of the world merely 'as representation', he maintained, and as long as we consider reality merely as 'an object for a subject' – and likewise, as long as we consider ourselves merely as subjects capable of representing how things may be in the world – we will be unable to account for what is ineluctably personal, individual, subjective, or unique in our experience. For Schopenhauer, that is, the world as representation is entirely impersonal, and in this respect it closely resembles the totality of states of affairs which, according to the *Tractatus*, we can represent to ourselves in thought. Nothing intrinsic either to such states of affairs or to such thoughts is in any way personal or subjective: nothing marks a particular thought as essentially *mine*. And for Schopenhauer, the subject that has such thoughts is likewise devoid of personality. The riddle of subjectivity, he maintains, can receive no solution here. Rather, he writes, 'the answer to this riddle is given in the subject of knowledge appearing *as individual*, and this answer is given in the word *will*. This and this alone gives him the key to his own phenomena.'[33] This line of thought emerges in the *Notebooks*, where at one point, for example, Wittgenstein writes:

> Is belief a kind of experience?
> Is thought a kind of experience?
> All experience is world and does not need the subject.
> The act of will is not an experience. (9.11.16)

Some ten days later, however, a quite different approach to 'the riddle of subjectivity' is canvassed:

> What kind of reason is there for the assumption of the willing subject? Is not *my world* adequate for individuation? (19.11.16)

The last two sentences suggest, and the text of the *Tractatus* confirms, that Wittgenstein came to reject the Schopenhauerian model, according to which the willing subject is taken to be the origin of all that is personal and subjective. But rejection of that model creates a theoretical vacuum, which the suggestion that *my world* 'is adequate for individuation' is perhaps intended to fill. Now suppose we ask: Amongst all the possible worlds one can conceive, which of them is the actual world? Of all the logically consistent, maximally large sets of possible states of affairs, which of them, uniquely, comprises *reality*? Wittgenstein's suggestion seems to be that the only specification we can make intelligible to ourselves is one that contains an inerradicable token-reflexive, indeed egocentric component. The actual world, the real world, we seem forced to say, is just *this* world. And the challenge thrown down by the metaphysical solipsist is to provide an account of what *'this'* means here which is devoid of all egocentric, subjective commitments. If this cannot be done – and I believe it cannot – then this takes us at least some way towards grasping Wittgenstein's solipsistic vision, according to which the uniqueness and identity of the objective world, and those of myself as the locus of subjectivity, have become inextricably intertwined.

To the metaphysical question: 'What is it that makes me essentially (and not merely contingently) unique?' I am, it seems, driven to invoke something that is inalienably, unshareably mine, namely: my subjectivity. And yet, for the question 'What does my subjectivity consist in?' the only direction in which an answer seems to be possible is one that requires me to say: 'I am whatever it is that is conscious of *all this*' – and here I gesture outwards, towards the world and everything in it. But equally, to the question 'What makes the world unique, what does its actuality consist in?' I can only answer 'The actual world is simply *all this*, it is whatever this consciousness is directed towards.' And here again I gesture outwards, towards the objects of my awareness. In the relevant sense of 'I', the sense in which it comprises a genuine index of subjectivity, I am just whatever it is that has *this* as a world; and reality is whatever it is that I confront.

The gestures mentioned in the preceding paragraph are of course hopeless. They are hopeless because, although they seem intended to point to, or individuate something ('all *this*'), they necessarily fail to pick anything out, or distinguish any one thing from any other. The failure is symmetrical, however, in that neither the world as a whole, nor any locus of genuine subjectivity is successfully individuated by such hand-waving – even when accompanied by repeated and emphatic uses of the word 'this'.[34] And in both cases the reason is the same: the actual world and my subjectivity have, in Wittgenstein's phrase, 'no neighbours'.[35] Generally speaking, a necessary

(however obscurely) to concern the uniqueness of the objective world and how this is related to the uniqueness of one's subjectivity:

> The world and life are one. Physiological life is of course not 'life'. And neither is psychological life. Life is the world. (24.7.16)
>
> Only from the consciousness of the *uniqueness of my life* arises religion – science – and art. And this consciousness is life itself. (1.8.16)
>
> Now is it true . . . that my character is expressed only in the build of *my* body and brain, and not equally in the build of the whole of the rest of the world? This contains a salient point.
>
> This is the way I have travelled: Idealism singles men out from the world as unique, solipsism singles me out alone, and at last I see that I too belong with the rest of the world, and so on the one side *nothing* is left over, and on the other side, as unique, *the world*. (15.10.16)
>
> Is not *my world* adequate for individuation? (19.11.16)

The overall context in which these remarks occur is one where Wittgenstein is exploring, and eventually dissociating himself from, an explicitly Schopenhauerian approach to individuality and individuation. Now Schopenhauer had himself addressed what he called 'the riddle of subjectivity'. As long as we restrict ourselves to consideration of the world merely 'as representation', he maintained, and as long as we consider reality merely as 'an object for a subject' – and likewise, as long as we consider ourselves merely as subjects capable of representing how things may be in the world – we will be unable to account for what is ineluctably personal, individual, subjective, or unique in our experience. For Schopenhauer, that is, the world as representation is entirely impersonal, and in this respect it closely resembles the totality of states of affairs which, according to the *Tractatus*, we can represent to ourselves in thought. Nothing intrinsic either to such states of affairs or to such thoughts is in any way personal or subjective: nothing marks a particular thought as essentially *mine*. And for Schopenhauer, the subject that has such thoughts is likewise devoid of personality. The riddle of subjectivity, he maintains, can receive no solution here. Rather, he writes, 'the answer to this riddle is given in the subject of knowledge appearing *as individual*, and this answer is given in the word *will*. This and this alone gives him the key to his own phenomena.'[33] This line of thought emerges in the *Notebooks*, where at one point, for example, Wittgenstein writes:

> Is belief a kind of experience?
> Is thought a kind of experience?
> All experience is world and does not need the subject.
> The act of will is not an experience. (9.11.16)

condition of one's successfully perceiving, conceiving, referring to, or describing something is the individuation of that thing: one must be capable of picking it out in some way, and thus distinguishing it from its neighbours. This thought lies at the root of Frege's influential maxim that 'if we are to use the symbol *a* to signify an object, we must have a criterion for deciding in all cases whether *b* is the same as *a*'.[36] Throughout his life Wittgenstein subscribed to this Fregean constraint on reference. But he also subscribed to its corollary – namely, that in situations where, so to speak, there *are* no neighbours, where there can be no discrimination, individuation or criteria of identity, in such situations there can be no reference to, or assertions about, objects. In such cases the entire machinery of objectivity (involving objects, facts, reference, identity, assertion, truth, knowledge, proof, evidence, certainty, and so forth) becomes in principle inoperative. Here there is simply nothing objective that can coherently be said – or thought. We are confronted, however, not with anything that is objectionably mystical and ineffable, but rather with 'what can only be shown', that is, with what can only be communicated by *expressive* behaviour and uses of language.

My subjectivity is clearly not, for me, something *in* the world. It is not merely one thing amongst others, something that I might need criteria in order to identify, or about which I can come to acquire objective knowledge – if it were, it would of course be something objective for me, as indeed it is for others. Rather, my subjectivity, for me, is omnipresent: it permeates absolutely everything; it pervades the world and is indistinguishable from it. It is something I can express – or, more strongly, it is something that I cannot avoid expressing – as long as I am conscious; it is not, however, something about which I can possibly be objective.

VI. Subjectivity in a Public World

It is now widely, almost universally held that the *Philosophical Investigations* as a whole, and the passages comprising the so-called private language argument in particular, are intended to constitute a repudiation of the author's earlier solipsistic sympathies, and a presentation of a radically anti-solipsist alternative.[37] In this last section I shall try to indicate, though only very briefly, why this might seem an inadequate basis on which to respond to Wittgenstein's later thought. For it seems to me, to the contrary, that the private language argument, far from comprising a rejection and refutation of solipsism, is in a number of crucial respects an endorsement and development of it.

In order to bring out the underlying continuities in Wittgenstein's thought on these matters, we can begin by noting that the possibility of a self-effacing, fact-preserving solipsistic re-description is reaffirmed in the *Investigations:*

> If I were to reserve the word 'pain' solely for what I had hitherto called 'my pain' and others 'L.W.'s pain', I should do other people no

> injustice, so long as a notation were provided in which the loss of the word 'pain' in other connections were somehow supplied. Other people would still be pitied, treated by doctors and so on. It would, of course, be *no* objection to this mode of expression to say: 'But look here, other people have just the same as you!'[38]

The imagined response would indeed miss the point, for what is under consideration here is an alternative, equally expressive notation, not a substantial denial that some state of affairs obtains. As Wittgenstein rightly claims, however, arguments in the metaphysics of experience have traditionally been conducted as if it were the *facts* that were at issue: 'For *this* is what disputes between Idealists, Solipsists and Realists look like. The one party attack the normal form of expression as if they were attacking a statement; the others defend it, as if they were stating facts recognized by every reasonable human being' (*PI*, § 402).

Having introduced the possibility of a solipsistic notation, Wittgenstein then addresses directly the question which also faces us: 'But what should I gain from this new mode of presentation?' And his answer is: 'Nothing'. A number of commentators and critics have taken this answer to comprise good evidence that by the time he came to write the *Investigations* Wittgenstein had learned to reject the temptations of solipsism. But they typically fail to quote or consider the whole of Wittgenstein's response, in all its studied ambivalence. To the question about what would be gained by adopting a new, solipsistic form of description, his answer is: 'Nothing. But after all, neither does the solipsist *want* any practical advantage when he advances his view.' The implication, I take it, is that the new notation is not preferable in any *practical* respect: it is neither more powerful, nor more accurate, nor more economical. But if none of these things, then what sorts of benefits can the solipsist expect from his new mode of presentation? The unsurprising answer is that the benefits of metaphysical solipsism are entirely *philosophical*. And some of those philosophical benefits can be seen at work in a number of the most characteristic elements of Wittgenstein's later thought.

To bring this out, we can ask: What kind of philosopher might we expect to find at the centre of a solipsistic language? What sorts of philosophical insights might accrue to one who took the possibility of such a fact-preserving re-description seriously? One thing is clear: he would hardly need to be persuaded that in general 'An "inner process" stands in need of outward criteria' (*PI* §580). The existence of such criteria is built into the very grammar of his language; for in ascribing an 'inner process' to another person he needs to say something of the form 'So-and-so is behaving as the Centre does when . . .'. That behavioural criteria are involved in third-person, psychological assertions is manifest in the surface grammar of this language. The philosopher at the Centre is, likewise, unlikely to be attracted to the supposition that the word 'I' refers to the owner or subject of private experiences;[39] for he has neither use for the first-person in his own case, nor use for the notion of a bearer or owner of states of consciousness in the case of others. And, indeed, the very notion of a private object of

reference, an essentially subjective content of consciousness, is likely to prove deeply unattractive; for his language functions, perspicuously, by relating forms of behaviour of others to forms of behaviour of the Centre, and ultimately relating the latter to unowned events and facts in the world. Moreover, the philosopher who views things from the Centre will have no temptation to assert anything equivalent in his language to the sentences in ours about which Wittgenstein has taught us to be suspicious – sentences such as 'Only I can know whether I am in pain; another person can only surmise it' (*PI*, §246); 'One has to imagine another's pain on the model of one's own' (*PI*, §302); and 'It is only from my own case that I know what the word "pain" means' (*PI*, §293).

One general tendency which I think characterizes Wittgenstein's later philosophy as a whole is his instance on the massive, categorial, and often incommensurable differences between (a) cases in which a person gives expression to his or her own subjectivity, as against (b) cases in which someone reports on the psychological states of another. According to Wittgenstein, these asymmetries are not typically articulated by appeal to differences between, say, the objects or entities referred to, the states or processes described, the kind of criteria that are employed, or the kinds of knowledge or certainty that are justified. On the contrary, Wittgenstein most often marks the asymmetries between (a) and (b) by arguing that, uniquely, cases of type-(a) are not to be understood in terms of objects, entities, reference, processes, criteria, knowledge, certainty, or justification, *at all*. And precisely this vision of the asymmetry between the expressive, spontaneous aspects of genuine subjectivity, on the one hand, and the fully objective, assertoric, referential, criterial nature of our knowledge of the psychological states of others, on the other, receives its first expression in the solipsism we have been examining.

I earlier characterized the main impulse towards solipsism as a dissatisfaction with a widespread, traditional way of locating subjectivity in the world. According to that view the universe is seen as containing, in a philosophically interesting way, things that are exclusively *mine*, and also things that are unowned yet 'alien'. In contrast, the solipsist offers a vision in which the world is no longer 'alien'; no part of reality is in principle inaccessible or private; knowledge of others' mental acts and states is no longer philosophically problematic; and one's own subjectivity no longer comprises just another thing one has to contend with in the world. This movement out of the self into the world, with its attendant rejection of the philosophical centrality of self-knowledge, self-identity, and self-absorption, is not reversed in the private language argument. On the contrary, I believe, it receives its definitive expression there.

Stanley Cavell has captured an important aspect of Wittgenstein's later thought. He writes:

> Draw the moral of the fantasy of a private language in this way: The natural importance of, say, a sensation's being mine – i.e., of my having it, or rather of its being me who suffers it – is read philosophically as the

> sensation's being uniquely mine, its being unpossessable by any other. Then when Wittgenstein says, for example, 'In so far as it makes sense to speak of the same pain, it makes sense to say we both have the same pain', this seems, within that philosophical reading, to diminish the importance of the fact that I have it. He seems to trivialize my (inner) life. – In a way this is true. I think one moral of the *Investigations* as a whole can be drawn as follows: The fact, and the state of your (inner) life cannot take its importance from anything special in it. However far you have gone with it, you will find that what is common is there before you are. The state of your life may be, and may be all that is, worth your infinite interest. But that can only exist along with a complete disinterest towards it. The soul is impersonal.[40]

This seems to me profoundly right. But this vision, I suggest, bears a striking resemblance to that which finds expression in Wittgenstein's early solipsism – in the claim, for example, that 'All experience is world and does not need the subject', a claim which, when its implications are followed out strictly, culminates in Wittgenstein's radically anti-Cartesian revelation: 'at last I see that I too belong with the rest of the world, and so on the one side *nothing* is left over, and on the other side, as unique, *the world*.'[41]

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NOTES

[1] Wittgenstein (1953), §418.

[2] Kant (1900-), vol. 18, p. 319, *Reflexion* 5661.

[3] Wittgenstein eventually concludes that it is precisely this first step, 'the one that altogether escapes notice', which is responsible for leading us philosophically astray: 'The decisive movement in the conjuring trick has already been made, and it was the very one we thought quite innocent.' Wittgenstein (1953), §308.

[4] Burnyeat (1982), p. 49.

[5] See, e.g., the title of Descartes' 'Second Meditation', in Descartes (1954), p. 66.

[6] Ibid., p. 75.

[7] Wittgenstein (1953), p. 222.

[8] Ibid., §246.

[9] See, e.g., ibid., §§244, 253, 256, 288, 290, 293, 304.

[10] Ibid., p. 222.

[11] Ibid., §§303, 357, and p. 222.

[12] Ibid., §§283, 288, 420.

[13] Ibid., §§304–308.

[14] This reading comes closest to that offered in Miller (1980). See also Malcolm (1982), pp. 249–251.

[15] Wittgenstein (1961b). References in the text are by proposition number.

[16] Wittgenstein (1961a). References are by date of entry.

[17] The allusion to Kant is based on the following remarkable anticipation. In the *Opus Postumum* he writes: 'What if the idealistic system (that I myself alone am the world) were the only one thinkable by us? Science would lose nothing thereby. What matters is only the lawlike connection of appearances. Transcendental philosophy abstracts from all objects . . . and addresses only principles of the formal element of knowledge.' Kant (1993), p. 251; Kant (1900–), vol. 21, p. 88.

[18] Hamlyn (1970), p. 216.

[19] Russell (1927), p. 302. A similar response can also be found in Russell (1948), p. 196.

[20] Schopenhauer (1969), §18, p. 104.

[21] Anscombe (1967), p. 168.

[22] Pears (1987/88), vol. I, p. 235.

[23] Letter from Mrs Christine Ladd Franklin to Bertrand Russell, August 21, 1912. Quotation here is by kind permission of Dr Kenneth Blackwell, the Bertrand Russell Archives, McMaster University.

[24] James (1890), p. 289.

[25] Wittgenstein (1961a), entry for 9.11.16.

[26] See Wilson (1959), pp. 521–39.

[27] Leibniz (1973), p. 212.

[28] It would not be inappropriate to construe the device of 'fact-preserving re-description' as a means of distinguishing between, but at the same time endorsing both (what Peter Hacker calls) 'empirical realism and transcendental solipsism' (see Hacker (1972), pp. 168ff). In the present paper, however, I have thought it best to eschew any talk of 'the transcendental'.

[29] Wittgenstein (1953), §371.

[30] Wittgenstein (1979b), p. 22.

[31] Wittgenstein (1975), §§57–58. See also Wittgenstein (1979a), p. 49.

[32] See, e.g., Moore (1959), p. 309. According to Moore, Wittgenstein 'quoted with apparent approval Lichtenberg's saying "Instead of 'I think' we ought to say 'It thinks' " ("it" being used, as he said, as "Es" is used in "Es blitzt")'.

[33] Schopenhauer (1969), p. 100.

[34] The allusion here is to the similar remarks in Wittgenstein (1953), §253.

[35] See, e.g., Wittgenstein (1958), pp. 71ff; Wittgenstein (1968), pp. 283, 297; and Moore (1959), p. 310.

[36] Frege (1950), §62, p. 73.

[37] See, e.g., Cook (1972), pp. 37–72; Hacker (1972), passim; D. F. Pears (1987/88), passim. See also Pears' contribution to the present issue of this journal.

[38] Wittgenstein (1953) – abbreviated hereafter as *PI* – §403.

[39] Cf. *PI*, §404, where Wittgenstein provides a justification for saying: 'When I say "I am in pain", I do not point to a person who is in pain, since in a certain sense I have no idea *who* is.' See also Wittgenstein (1975), §65.

[40] Cavell (1979), p. 361.

[41] This paper has been presented before a number of audiences, over a number of years. For their helpful and challenging responses I should like to express my gratitude to Myles Burnyeat, Andy Hamilton, Hidé Ishiguro, Andreas Kemmerling, the late Professor Norman Malcolm, Adrian Moore, the late Professor Peter Nidditch, Lucy O'Brien, David Pears, Mark Sacks, Joachim Schulte, Wilhelm Vossenkuhl, the late Professor N. L. Wilson, and Crispin Wright. An earlier, German version of the paper appeared in Vossenkuhl (1992), pp. 29–52.

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