

**University of South Bohemia, Ceske Budejovice**  
**Faculty of Theology**  
**Department of Philosophy and Religious Sciences**

**Bachelor's Degree Thesis**

**SOLIPSISM – An EXTREME of RATIONALISM**

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Hereby I declare that I have prepared my bachelor's degree thesis entirely on my own, using as reference sources the literature listed in the section at the end of the paper.

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## Acknowledgments

When, in rather advanced age and having terminated my professional career in engineering, I decided to try to return to a quite different field of interest of my teen age at the grammar school, it was clear to me that it would be impossible without expert guidance, support and patience of people dedicated to this particular field. By sheer luck, almost a touch of providence, I encountered such collective of people here in Ceske Budejovice, the place to which my profession had brought me eighteen years earlier after more than twenty five years of pursuing my career in engineering through several European countries and the USA. At the Faculty of Theology of the University of South Bohemia I found a programme of study in Humanities, ideal to provide missing pieces in my education. However, this is the easy part of the story. My luck is that the programme has been provided by a group of scholars, most of them a generation my juniors, dedicated to their respective fields of expertise, and keen on imparting and sharing their knowledge. I am most sincerely grateful to all of them, who not only helped me to retrieve the information I had pushed to the back of memory long ago, but taught me new things that I had not thought of before. In the first place I have in mind the teachings in philosophy provided by the staff of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Sciences.

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## Introduction

*The view that only oneself exists.*

This is the definition of solipsism according to *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. An immediate reaction is one of disbelief and rejection of such a proposition. In the worst case it is taken as such a detachment from reality that it should be cured as a psychiatric condition. As a consolation to a common sense reader, in the continuation of the reference article the overall position on solipsism is negative, although it gives some explanation of such an idea. Moreover, the entry does not quote a single philosopher of a renowned name supporting the idea. Bertrand Russell's voluminous *History of Western Philosophy* contains only four one-line references to the subject<sup>1</sup>, none of them more than treating it as an extreme variation of more plausible possibilities. It looks like that any implied relation of a philosopher to the idea of solipsism is taken as an accusation or, at least, a grave insinuation. Probably that is why in some texts excuses like “ ... , but his philosophy is not solipsistic, because ... “ can be found. Nevertheless, in the Oxford volume, towards the end of the article there is a statement:

*But if solipsism is absurd, discussing it is not.*<sup>2</sup>

This is exactly what I am going to try in this paper, to discuss the concept of solipsism as much as remote it could appear. It has never occurred to me to try to propose, let alone to establish some solipsistic system. However, although, as already said, there are no philosophical authorities openly proposing solipsism, some of them made at least possible to flirt with such a path of thought. Encouraged by such hints, in a chapter dedicated to reasoning of my own I will dare to indicate that one could be led to solipsism as one of logically valid consequences of some presumptions by following strictly (or blindly?) certain way of thinking. As a consequence of scarcity of texts treating solipsism as a valid proposal I will not be able to give to many direct references. Most of them will be in the introductory part of the document, where I try to justify the basic

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<sup>1</sup> B. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (BRHWP), Folio Society, London, 2004 – pg. 626, comment on Berkeley; pg. 651, on influence of German idealism; pg. 671, comment on Hume; pg. 685, reference to Fichte's subjectivism

<sup>2</sup> *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (OCP), Ed. T. Honderich, Oxford University Press, 2005– pg. 883 *solipsism*, J.E.R. Squires

sense of the task. The rest of the document will present my own understanding of the subject.

As the basis of the venture I shall use a selected overview of philosophical ideas of some of renowned philosophers, who maybe unwillingly contributed to making solipsism worth discussing. In that section I will try to limit my interpretation of their theories to a minimally necessary measure. There are two main reasons for such approach: the first one is the expectation that dedicated probable readers are enough acquainted with the respective subjects, and the second one is more subjective i.e. I myself have always been convinced that in order not to make an initial idea unrecognizable or even lost, one should not expand it with unnecessary details, despite of being presented in good faith of making it more acceptable. Actually, initially I was considering limiting my exploration of solipsism solely on the basis of Descartes' *res cogitans*. After a while I chose some other philosophers, but I openly confess that I cherry picked out of their ideas only those, which at least indirectly contribute to my understanding of solipsism. Consequently, the chapters on them will be shorted to a bare minimum. I am aware that such approach can be found not only oversimplified, but also containing some misinterpretations. In the latter case I readily admit my limited capabilities as the cause of deficiency.

Anyway, based on my best understanding I will make an eclectic compilation of thoughts of conveniently selected thinkers in order to show that discussing solipsism is not absurd. I dare believe that when I arrive to the conclusion of the paper it will be possible to indicate what could be the consequences if any. In order to make it worth considering I shall stick as strictly as possible to the literal definition quoted at the beginning. As a matter of fact, just because it seems that the very definition is what makes the idea of solipsism unacceptable and thus absurd to the common sense, in order to investigate the subject one should do his best not to deviate from the course indicated by the definition.

Of course, I am well aware that speaking and writing about a theme scarcely investigated, mainly because it is beyond common sense, can run into elemental problems of verbal expression, since there is not much terminological precedent.

## Selection of hints on solipsism

With all the apparent absurdity of the idea of solipsism it can come to the mind of any keen student of grammar school listening to a teacher trying to initialize pupils to thinking beyond everyday experience based on the immediate sensory inputs to our mind. To most of them it will never occur to expand such thought, it is only a glimpse. The remaining few, if any, will hardly dare to think that they have come to something original as, having read fundamental philosophical texts of the school curriculum, they become aware that throughout the history of human mind the amount of conceived and explored ideas not only has been progressing towards infinity, but very many of them have been recycled. Thus, even if they have not come across a literal mentioning of solipsism, they will most probably conclude that it must be treated somewhere. However, as already mentioned in the Introduction, the answer is not a straightforward *yes*.

Preparing this text I must admit that I did not try that much to elaborate possible traces of solipsism in works of philosophers before New Age. The main reason was the fact that the idea of solipsism occurred to me spontaneously after having read Descartes who definitely offered such possibility. When I found that an authority, however controversial, as B. Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy* did not go further back in history I felt that my conclusion was justified.

In my selection I have taken the following thinkers in historical sequence:

Rene Descartes (1596 – 1650)

Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza (1632 – 1677)

George Berkeley (1685 – 1753)

Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762 – 1814)

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951)

Finally, I dare refer to these biblical inspirational lines:

*... was waste, darkness covered the deep, and the spirit (of God) hovered over ...  
... let (us) make human (beings in our image), after (our) likeness ...<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> *The Revised English Bible (REB)*, Oxford / Cambridge University Press, 1989 – *Genesis 1, 2 ; 1, 26*

When read with the contents in parenthesis deleted, *the spirit* interpreted as the only thinking subject and *likeness* as the likeness to this subject, the road to solipsism is opened. I am aware that for the religious this is a blasphemy, but it still belongs to the discussion.



## Descartes – *Res extensa* and God, an escape from solipsism?

One of revelations to which came St. Augustine in his meditations was *Cogito, ergo sum*. We ascribe this declaration to Rene Descartes although in his *Meditations on first Philosophy* twelve centuries later it does not appear. Still, the fact is that the principal conclusion of the Second Meditation can be paraphrased as the famous declaration. But with a difference to the saint's religious spirituality Descartes' finding was a result of the search for the fixed and indisputable departure point on the road to the utmost limits of knowledge. I shall not recount the way by which the philosopher came to his famous conclusion since it is very well known. It suffices to say that to great majority of us it is logical and clear and that along the way the master developed a generally applicable method of solving all kinds of problems, which has been used ever since in humanistic as well as natural sciences. It could appear that on such firm foundation there would not be a problem to build a complete functional system. However, Descartes himself realized that it was not enough. Moreover, it turned out that the fixed starting point generated more questions, which could not be answered in similarly indisputable way. Or did it only seem to him; was he afraid of vaguely inferred consequences? Before recapitulating how he made up for the insufficiency of the fundamental conclusion, let me make a short excursion and ask some questions, in addition to those asked by Descartes himself, which could give some hints to the general subject of the paper.

*Cogito, ergo (ego) sum.*

Are there other *egos* who can claim the same? Can it be proved or disproved? May the expansion of the theory of *ego cogitans* to *res cogitans* be justified? If there are more thinking *egos*, are they aware of the existence of others; are their respective ways of thinking compatible for any kind of intercommunication, is any communication possible at all? These questions can be asked even before considering other relations such as *res cogitans* vs. *res extensa*. In any case, *ego cogitans* alone is, if not clear indication of solipsism, then at least a possible direction sign towards subjectivism.

In his effort to prove generalized *res extensa* Descartes could not find anything close to his straightforward proof of *res cogitans*. That is why his *res extensa* is less convincing, while the “proof” of the existence of God as an interconnection

between the two *rebus(es)* i.e. as a reconciliation of his dualism is really *Deus ex machina*. Imagined intervention of an evil *daimon* followed by its rejection does not deserve a comment. I can only speculate whether Descartes did not realize that he was not so consistent in expanding his system or he did realize that his method was insufficient and then resorted to apparently convenient inventions. The way he treats senses is something that can be questioned. First of all, there is no doubt for him that they exist; he even takes the alleged deception caused by them as one of premises to his *cogito* conclusion. Let us say, just for the sake simplicity, that we accept the existence of senses. Are they capable of deceit? No, normally functioning senses are just apparatuses, which register what they sense; a deception is a product of mind. Still, even if the question of senses does not affect the *cogito* conclusion, it is just an example that Descartes was not always strict in his method. On the other hand, the assumed existence of senses enabled him to propose *res extensa*. Whatever the explanation of *res extensa* is, its existence indirectly enables the escape from solipsism. *Res extensae* are not empty shells; on the contrary they are abstractions of material bodies, human bodies included and through God's mediation related to *res cogitantes*. Hence, it could appear to him that there was no solipsism.

Going back to the completion of the monism of *res cogitans* to the dualism with *res extensa* as the counterpart, a question remains: At the end was the cause just everyman's common sense that something was missing or something else? Very likely, for a thinker who wanted to make his conclusions independent from all appearances i.e. for somebody to whom the very term "common sense" could be an empty phrase, it was not the first reason. Still, already in the Synopsis of Six Meditations he claims that in the fourth Meditation it is proved that "*all that we clearly and distinctly understand is true*"<sup>4</sup>.

Among other possibilities we could suspect that one of the reasons was theological. Let be not forgotten that Descartes was deeply religious. At this point solipsism could have very strong impact. A strict solipsism would mean that there is a single thinking subject. He thinks about everything and everything is what he thinks, so that really he thinks only about himself. But no man or other creature, only God, is entitled to that. In sixteenth century such a heresy would have not been tolerated even in relatively permissive Netherlands.

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<sup>4</sup> *Classics of Western Philosophy* (CWP), Ed. S.M. Cahn, Hackett Publ. Co., 1995 – R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* – Synopsis, 13, pg. 434

The above lines are not that much a criticism; they are more an expression of understanding the situation in which any philosopher finds himself when he has to make decision how to proceed from a point, which he made fundamental to his systematic thinking, but it can not lead to the satisfactory completion of the system. In this particular case the problem is that although *ego/res cogitans* seems to be beyond doubt, as a single actuator it is very demanding, maybe even too demanding.

Anyway, at the closure of the chapter, I cannot help giving a verdict on Descartes: It does not matter that he would have not admitted to be a solipsist, but unwillingly he enabled such possibility, for the simple reason that his *res extensa* was a product of his thinking, *res cogitata*.

## Spinoza – (re)unification of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, God as solipsist?

Although Spinoza overcame the dualism of Descartes, he did not eliminate the possibility of solipsism. He did not give a definite proof of the existence of *res extensa* either and did not elaborate much whether there were more *res cogitantes* and *res extensae*. Instead, as explained in his *Ethics*, he found an attractive solution by declaring God as spatially unlimited mind, thus uniting the counterparts of Descartes' dualism.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, he claims that God is the only substance, while everything else is but a modification of it i.e. of this unlimited mind.<sup>6</sup>

Now, let me go back to the definition of solipsism: ... *only oneself* ... From Descartes it could appear that *oneself* should be *ego*. Not necessarily, why not just a thinking singular subject? If somebody calls it God, let it be, although it implies some attributes, which I would not like to discuss at this point, but I leave it to a dedicated chapter. Anyway, without widening the discussion and, with some mental effort, Spinoza's solution, generally known as pantheism, can be without exaggeration called, for instance, *deistic solipsism*, or more generally, *impersonal solipsism*.

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<sup>5</sup> CWP – B. Spinoza, *Ethics II*, Proposition 1: ... *God is a thinking thing*; Scholium: ... *infinite thinking being*; Proposition 2: ... *God is an extended thing*; Proposition 7-Scholium: ... *whatever can be perceived by infinite intellect ... pertains entirely to the one sole substance ... thinking substance and extended substance are one and the same substance*

<sup>6</sup> CWP – B. Spinoza, *Ethics I*, Proposition 14: *There can be, or be conceived, no other substance but God*; Corollary 2: ... *thing extended and ... thinking ... attributes of God or affections of the attributes ...*

## Berkeley – can an empiricist be a solipsist?

It came to me as a surprise when in the textbook *Filosofie* by a Czech author Ivan Blecha under the entry of solipsism I found a single philosopher, namely George Berkeley<sup>7</sup>. I could understand the attribution of sensualist to his philosophy, but solipsist was too much. The worst of all is that as I dare not argue with the known author, I am supposed to conclude that I have not understood the definition of solipsism. For me an empiricist, like Berkeley, takes the existence of senses for granted and, through their act of perception, the existence of the outer world with other subjects having senses and mind among other qualities. Thus it becomes difficult to defend the definition of solipsism. In the case of more than one sensualist subject, each of them can have its own and only, let us say solipsistic world, but at the end it would amount to something like multi-solipsism i.e. an oxymoron.

There are two reasons why I still include Berkeley and both are again related to my understanding of solipsism. The first one is his immaterialism i.e. the rejection of the existence of the matter. Basically, it follows almost directly from his famous statement *esse est percipi*<sup>8</sup>, but only if he can prove that senses are pure functions of mind i.e. that are definitely not material. Additional explanation in his *Dialogues*<sup>9</sup>, although intriguing, has not convinced me either. Although I cannot accept his explanation of the immaterial world, I definitely find it as a prerequisite of solipsism. The second one, of lesser importance, is that he prefers to call the immaterial thinking subject Spirit and not Mind, what seems worth considering.

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<sup>7</sup> I. Blecha, *Filosofie* (IBF), Nakladatelství OLOMOUČ, 2004 – 3.3.3.3 Solipsismus, pg. 105

<sup>8</sup> CWP – G. Berkeley, *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Of the Principles, 6. Whole paragraph, pg. 758

<sup>9</sup> CWP – G. Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous in Opposition to Sceptics and Atheists* – First Dialogue, pgs. 765-791; Second D., pgs. 791-803

## **Fichte – Absolute Ego, Spinoza’s solipsism without God?**

Most probably I could choose more than one representative of the German classical idealism as a contributor to the concept of solipsism, but at the end I settled for Fichte. The reason is self-understandably his *Absolute Ego*. He himself did not label his ideas as solipsistic, but the indication was strong enough for some of his admirers to defend him from such insinuations and write apologies on his behalf.<sup>10</sup>

Although presented in different manner I find his *Absolute Ego* rather similar in real meaning to Spinoza’s spatially unlimited mind. Being not God the idea of *Absolute Ego* offers more “user friendly” possibilities of understanding a strictly solipsistic subject, at least to my opinion on the subject. Very important point is that *Absolute Ego* is not identical to the commonly understood “lower level” *Ego*, which gets a role of an actor playing *Absolute Ego* in the world of other things generated by it.

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<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, I cannot give a reference to the source. The text on Fichte, where I found mentioned apologetic entries, I read quite long ago.

## Wittgenstein – back to realism

The reason that I include Wittgenstein in this selection is, let me say, indirect. I knew, and still know, his philosophy rather vaguely, but through a reference in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* I came across a text on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* by Alfred Jules Ayer<sup>11</sup> and through it to paragraphs 5.62 to 5.64 of *Tractatus* itself. There I could find for the first time in a work of a renowned philosopher treated the concept of solipsism. He even affirms that the intention of solipsism could be right, but it would not be possible to formulate it. Otherwise, among his objections to solipsism the well-known one boils down to the need of a language as a means to formulate and communicate thoughts and, as communication implies the existence of other minds, the very idea of solipsism falls. I will try to counter this at an appropriate point in the text of the paper.

However, this was not what drew my attention; it was the line “*The conclusion is that solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism.*”<sup>12</sup> There is no explanation, A. F. Ayer notes that too, gives no explanation of his either, but I am pleasantly surprised, because this happens to be my own conclusion on consequences of solipsism, if it were true. I will explain my understanding in the dedicated chapter.

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<sup>11</sup>A. J. Ayer, *Philosophy in the twentieth century* (APTC), Ed. Phoenix, London, 1992 – The *Tractatus* and its sequels, pgs. 118-121

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pg. 119

## Solipsism as Extreme Rationalism

### Presumptions

This chapter is dedicated to my understanding of solipsism, if only as a remote possibility, which deserves to be discussed. As I already said earlier I shall not propose solipsism as something more than a possible outcome of a compilation of already proposed and well-known philosophic ideas after Descartes. As a matter of fact, in order to show that I am not introducing something completely new, to start with I will use the already known definition of solipsism, combine it with the idea of *res cogitans* and then try to follow strictly, maybe even *ad absurdum*, one of possible lines of thinking. Sometimes, it will lead to the limits of common sense, maybe even beyond it, but not beyond capabilities of a thinking subject. With regard to so called common sense, one should be aware that more than often it is something fixed in the mental environment of certain period of time. It is always possible to design another model of thinking, however bizarre, but functionally acceptable for the same or another environment in another period of time.

As it happens, satisfactory performance or functionality of a model of thinking in everyday use sometimes makes us forget to prove it thoroughly. Even in so exact physical sciences as nuclear physics understanding of some phenomena and their engineering applications are based on functional but unproved models. Here I have in mind the famous Bohr's model of atom, taught today in all higher classes of elementary school, without which the modern nuclear science would need either another bold model proposal or the final proof.

As the word "proof" has been used, let me make an excursion and try to explain what I see ultimately as a proof. It is something rational regardless of the world being material or immaterial. Here the word "rational" means understood by the mental process of reasoning, which is not necessarily perfect, definitely not in every moment. Even so called material proof is not the final proof of something as long as it is not rationally understood and accepted. It also applies to the common sense i.e. something generally accepted as true. Logical objection to such explanation would be that what I really espouse is bare consensus as an accepted proof. No, what I am aiming at is the fact of, let us call them, temporally limited capabilities of mind of individuals as well as groups of any



size. In other words, even if thinking capabilities of mind were limitless, and they probably are, they are not always available and thus used, some of them come to the surface of mind and again go under, and some of them maybe never will come to be used. We can talk about a consensual proof only after a group of persons or even a single person, to the best of their rational capabilities, accepts something as a proof and then they, as an authority, certified or not, on a subject can persuade others that it is so. Einstein's theory of relativity is understood by a very few people, but has been taken as proved by majority of the civilized world since long ago. But is it a proof of something or a successful model?

Anyway, based on the above, rationality itself has undefined limits and thus we should not be surprised that solipsism as a model of thinking can be considered as a form of extreme rationalism.

*The view that only oneself exists.*

Regardless of agreement or disagreement with the plausibility of anything thus defined, it seems that *only oneself* is sometimes interpreted with quite different meanings. Even some of the authors not proposing, but leaning towards solipsism discuss whether a single mind can understand *other minds* and then develop their reasoning. The very idea of *other mind(s)* is, if not beyond, but definitely at the outer limit of solipsism. It can only survive within the limits in case that any *other mind* is meant as conceived in the mind of *only oneself*.

*Sum res cogitans or Cogito, ergo sum.*

Descartes' only tight proof of existence of something, combined with the formerly accepted definition of solipsism, adds up to something like:

*The view, that only oneself as res cogitans exists, is called solipsism.*

Descartes was probably aware of the possibility to arrive to such conclusion and we have already commented how he avoided the trap. I will try to the best of my abilities to take exactly the path he did not i.e. there is a single thinking immaterial thing and everything else is nothing but creations of its thinking. I shall just mention, only for the sake of courtesy, but definitely not discuss the materialist theory that a thinking thing is not immaterial and thoughts themselves are states of the matter.

It should be pointed out that with the assumption that all things are just creations of processes of mind these creations should be roughly divided in two types: those resulting from already acquired knowledge and those conceived instantaneously without reference to something already known. I am not going to elaborate, but I should point out that with the second type conception means creation out of nothing, something like intuitive generation. Thinkers like Kant were aware of that and understood such ability as an attribute of God.

### **Overview of the model**

Thus, the starting point is the rational component of Descartes' dualism i.e. *res cogitans*. In order to promote the cause of solipsism, *res extensa* not only that is not wanted, it is not needed as an independent entity, because it can be simply introduced as a thought of an immaterial thinking thing. The thinking thing does not need any spatial dimension for itself, but eventually for those products of its thinking, which are thought to be of spatial nature. Again, the space can be an invention of the thinking thing. The net result is that we remain in the realm of thoughts i.e. in the immaterial world.

For the sake of solipsism Cartesian theory must be abandoned at the point where he introduced the existence of material bodies. A straightforward way of rejecting the existence of material bodies is to proclaim them imaginations of the thinking thing. If additional support is needed, Berkeley can provide it. He can be taken as one of the most known proponents of the immaterialist conception although his proof by invoking senses, without clear explanation of which nature they are, should be taken with a solipsist correction by which senses are also a conception of thoughts.

The other open question is the identity of *res cogitans* as the solipsistic *oneself*. Descartes himself was a little ambiguous on this; it is not clear whether the thinking thing necessarily is *ego*, but in Meditations his question is clear: "But what am I?" Common way of thinking, provided it somehow agreed at least to discuss the hypothesis of a solitary thinking subject, most probably would not see any other possibility, but to identify it as *ego* i.e. *myself*. As a reminder it should be pointed out that although the subject itself is singular its realm of thinking is universal.

For Spinoza the universal mind is God, but involvement of an omnipotent, omniscient, the most merciful and so on, you name it, being as the sole thinking subject is something I cannot swallow.

Fichte's *Absolute Ego* is closer to the point since it combines the notion of a universal spiritual potentiality, i.e a peculiar concept of not really *res cogitans*, but only *cogitans*<sup>13</sup>, and *Ego* as *res cogitans*, clean of theological references. Commonly understood *Ego* becomes something as acting representative, a subject of *Absolute Ego* in the world. This is my simplified interpretation of the relation between *Absolute Ego* and *Ego*. I was also playing with the idea of Master-Slave relation, but I did not find it that adequate. Likewise as Fichte I cannot explain how exactly *Absolute Ego* generates *Ego*. German verb *setzen* can be translated almost identically as *to set*, although *to plant* would be also descriptive. Another possibility that comes to mind is *to conceive*.<sup>14</sup> Whatever taken as the most adequate, one thing remains sure: The eternal *Absolute Ego* precedes *Ego*; the latter can be generated or not at all by the former, and when generated remains under control of pure *cogitans*. On the other hand, *Absolute Ego* knows that it needs *Ego* in order to take its part in the world.

Berkeley has offered another possible identification of a thinking thing. He speaks about spirit, which seems to be a wider term than mind and, maybe better describing the solipsistic actor and its supposed capabilities, the label of a single spirit or Spirit, for brevity, would be appropriate. The practical problem of it is that, if accepted, it would imply using the third person singular when following its actions.

With all the above said I dare say that I or *Ego* will be not only convenient, but also justified, at least for a simple reason that really, as the only existing entity it can be called any singular name. The oddity of it is that in philosophical discussions *Ego*, meaning the first person singular subject is accompanied with the third person singular verb. On the other hand a convinced, sworn solipsist in order to be consistent has no choice, but to use *Ego/Myself/I* with verbs in the first person singular.

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<sup>13</sup> *Fichtova teorie sebevedomi (Fichte's theory of Self-consciousness)* (FTS), Ed. M. Vrabec, TOGGA-Vita intellectiva, Prague, 2008 – J. Karasek, *Fichte cte Kanta (Fichte reading Kant)*, pg. 43

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, pg.45 – *Das Ich setzt ursprünglich schlechthin sein eigenes Sein (Myself/Absolute Ego originally simply conceives its own being/Ego)*

By now the model is an immaterial, shapeless i.e. non-spatial, one and only thinking subject called *Ego*.

What about attributes of *Ego cogitans*? What Descartes meant, when he said that he was a thinking thing, was a thing equipped with all mental, or in wider sense, spiritual abilities attributed to human being. In other words, his *res cogitans* was rational, but imperfect and this is something what should be kept in mind when we decide to follow the road to solipsism. Although solipsism presumes one and only thinking subject, it does not necessarily mean a godlike omniscient thinking, let alone omnipotent spiritual being. *Ego cogitans* can probably have unlimited mental capabilities, but it uses them at random in different points of time, some of them maybe even never, with all kind of different results, i.e. it thinks, memorizes, remembers, forgets, reasons, comes to right or wrong conclusions, doubts (*Dubito, ergo sum!*), believes or not, agrees and disagrees, and so on, you just name it. What is important, to think does not automatically mean to know; knowledge is the result of thinking, reasoning, building a system of logic along the way, learning, through a process of trial and error, with the absolute knowledge as a distant target. Thus, in case of hypothetically real solipsism with only one thinking subject, there is no omnipotent and omniscient God, no God at all, but only *Ego* with unlimited potential to become omniscient in uncertain future through gradual development of human qualities. Spinoza's God as unlimited mind and Berkeley's God as the highest spirit can give us useful hints, but it should be realized that their godlike supreme thinking being is out of place. Trying to promote a solipsistic model I must insist on human qualities of the universal thinking thing, because the intention is to show that it works in my world and this one happens to be human.

Maybe the last, but not the least, there is the question of (free?) will. In theological discussions hailed as a proof of God's magnanimity, but misused by the rational animal, in this discussion it becomes another limiting factor. First of all, what should be distinguished is *Will* and *Wish*. Although there is no justification, *Will* is too often understood as something powerful, enabling almost anything, even when attributed to lesser beings than deities. Yes, it is something powerful, but of varying intensity, a driving factor of either reasonable or fanciful *Wishes*, of *wishful thinking* of *res cogitans*. Thinking thing can wish anything, invest as much will in it as it is enabled by its own logic, but it cannot be sure what will be the result of the effort, because, as

already said above, all its actions are through thinking and the subsequent process of trial and error, doubts included.

Thus, the model has been practically completed. The immaterial rational *Ego* has limited capabilities. Main consequence of these rational limitations will be explained in next chapters where the model will be tested and test results commented. Some of the formerly proposed ideas will be expanded as necessary.

### **Does the model work?**

The best and only way to answer this question is to put the model on test. In order to make the test really solipsistic, I will try to use the first person singular as much as possible.

Although it could be more instructive to start with some general preparatory explanation, let me try with the story of this very paper I am writing. I will try to make it short and simple, maybe skip some explanations, but still I realize that from the beginning an uncommon way of thinking will be required. But as already said more than once, possibilities of occurrence of thoughts are infinite, the first problem is to put them in some order, then to try either to apply an earlier established logic or develop a new one, and other problems arise and are tackled along the way, what can depend on incidental abilities of my mind and power of my will.

Quite some time ago through my mind I created thought of writing symbols, letters, words, texts. Of course separately I created concepts of each of mentioned imagined objects, of act of writing, and of putting them reasonably together. Some time, whenever it was, I imagined education, educational institutions e.g. schools and faculties, theological one among them, since earlier I had had concepts of theology as one of scientific disciplines and so on. It occurred to me that I could think of attending this faculty as a student i.e. another invention of my mind. After a while I started to think that the faculty would demand from me a written document on some subject. It happens that I keep thinking that the imagined personnel of the imagined faculty do it, and as I respect (another mental act) the request, I start to think that I am writing the required document. I could continue in such manner, but as I hope that by now it

is clear what I want to demonstrate, let me skip to the end of the writing process. So far creations of my thinking have been imagined things or my acts. To explain what happens, when in my thoughts I submit the paper for imagined comments to imagined commission of scholars at the faculty, requires stepping to the next level of solipsist thinking. The imagined comments of other imagined minds are again really my comments, conceived in my mind. Very nice, I can simply think and thus make them affirmative to my exposed thoughts in the written form! No, it is not as simple as that. Everything and everyone mentioned so far has come out of my mind, but although I can maintain my imagined world as most suitable system for me, it is still affected by limitations mentioned in the previous chapter. I think, I learn, I know more and more, but I know that more knowledge can be still hidden to me, but hidden inside my mind, and therefore I can think that its revelation will occur through some other source e.g. imagined other minds. What can come from the comments can be either affirmative by the simple reason that I managed to tune my thoughts to the supposed thoughts of my imagined commentators, or affirmative by some of their additional findings in my favour, or critical with pros and cons, or negative because my mind found errors in my work, but decided to put them forward by the commentators and not me, or I can think that they do not understand my thinking, or . . . . Whatever were my capabilities of thinking and power of self-persuasion at a given point in time, they make the outcome of the case what becomes a fact in my mental experience, upon which I can invent the sequence of further events.

With regard to the previous paragraph another implicit item should be discussed, the means of my communication with imagined human beings. Basically, it is about language. Is it needed at all in a world of a single mind? Probably I can insist that I, as the only thinking thing, do not need it, because I already know the thoughts of my imagined correspondents since I myself planted them. However, let me approach to the problem from another side. What are possible solutions, if I conceive as few as two or as many as an infinite number of humanlike entities and then I suppose a communication between or among them? There is more than one possible way of communication, but I will stay with one, for a simple reason that it not only exists, but is common. Of course, I mean language. A solipsistic mind can come to any thought and it is up to it to implement it or not. Once I invent one language for any number or group of participants nothing stops me inventing another one for another group and so on.

Will I use any of them does not matter; it may depend on my will to get involved in an imagined communication myself. I know that I am.

At this point I shall take a break. In previous paragraphs I used a rather awkward wording on purpose. By repeating constantly “imagined”, “conceived”, “invented”, “created by my mind”, “by my thinking”, and other words for the sake of variety, I want to emphasize and remind that everything dealt with i.e. things, acts, thoughts are just my projected thoughts, *res cogitatae*. Once accepted this play with words can be pushed as a constant reminder, a self-understandable pre-condition, to the back of mind and continue in more conventional language. This is nothing specific to this particular subject, but regularly done in an established verbal communication. Insisting on details is basically restricted to precise explanations and definitions.

To make the long story short, if I want to promote the concept of solipsism, I should permanently keep in mind that my whole world is the world of my thoughts, through which my experience is built, despite apparent nonconformance with common sense. With this condition having been observed, it is possible to understand a general sense of explanation of cases like the above simple example. However, in order to present a simple explanation something, what requires stepping to the next level of solipsist mode of thinking, was skipped. The explanation of the sample test case was, with the exception of mentioning that some things had been thought earlier than others, limited to present or recent events, but always during that what is considered to be my lifetime. But how I can explain things and actions of distant past, if I take them as facts known directly to my mind? Again, I must stick to the precondition of understanding my world, with everything what happens in it, being a composition of my thoughts. In order to explain what I mean, let me expand the same test case with a reference to something in the past, e.g. by quoting Descartes as one of the sources for my paper. He allegedly lived more than three hundred years before me and it appears that I could not have any contemporary relation to him. In order to stay in the realm of solipsism, additional mental effort beyond common sense is needed. Hence, let me make Descartes an invention of my mind and place it to the imagined Holland in the imagined time interval of the sixteenth century. No doubt, this is weird, but still possible to think and moreover to explain the functional purpose of it, what is my intention.

Acceptance of the above daring possibility makes understandable discussing any historical period from solipsistic position. By a similar approach I can also propose spatial relations as my thoughts.

Without going into detail I will give another test example including time and space. Let me describe a voyage of a group of people to today's Amsterdam. For instance I can start by a thought of Europe. Some time before that, whenever, I thought of and memorized ideas of land, topography, flora, fauna, people, states, vehicles, travelling etc. After I have named everything I decide to think to put together a group of people, imagine them traveling to the European state called Netherlands, arriving to the city of Amsterdam and staying there a few days. I foresee them visiting Rijksmuseum to see Rembrandt's Night Watch. In order to realize this, the knowledge of Rembrandt as a painter from a century numbered as the seventeenth who painted the mentioned painting, of Rijksmuseum as the location where it can be seen, all these things should be already registered in my memory as products of my thinking, so that I could retrieve them and assign to the imagined minds of the tourists. I do not need to see me as a member of the group; I can think that they do what I have just described, I can think that one or more of them talk to me about their experience, I can invent what they say, there are many possibilities, but all of them eventually originate in my mind.

I shall not bother the reader with more test examples as I dare say that, despite challenging the common sense, the described model of thinking could be taken in consideration provided there is a bold determination of a thinking thing to apply it.

Nevertheless, since so far I have discussed mostly the basics of solipsism, I am aware that quite some of problematic questions can be yet asked. I have no pretensions to be able to list nearly all of them, let alone to answer them. What I can do is to do my best discussing in the next chapter those, which I see of major importance and to give, if not a clear answer, but an opinion within the limits of my capabilities and the reasonably limited scope of this paper. As a consequence, some of my proposals will be stretched up to the limits of common logic, but hopefully not beyond them.



## Some of remaining open items

### *Res cogitans* and *Ego*

Despite being treated up to now throughout the discussion as the only existing thinking subject the identities of general *res cogitans* and *Ego* remain not clarified. I tried to give some explanation while presenting initial conditions for the discussion where I expressed my opinion that Fichte's proposition was the most reasonable. I dared interpret it in the manner most suitable to my understanding of solipsism by declaring *Ego* the acting representative of the supreme universal spirit in my world, the only one that I know, i.e. *Absolute Ego* as it was named by Fichte maybe just for convenience. This idea calls for further clarification. What I want to say is that *Absolute Ego* does not belong to this world; moreover not any world and thus it is not the solipsist subject. The solipsistic subject is *Ego*, *I-Myself*, in this world. I am really not concerned about possible misunderstanding of Fichte since I do not see my interpretation implausible. The question that I see needing an answer is:

*Why such supreme mind would need a representative in the world thought by it?*

Parts of my answer are already scattered through this text. As I said repeatedly, the one and only *res cogitans* has many spiritual qualities, all of them subjected to certain limitations. After it created in its thoughts any type of environment with both inactive as well as active objects, which can be called World, it can occur to it to participate directly in events happening in the World. As by itself it is pure *res cogitans* and many of its creations are *res extensae* (my modification of Descartes), in order to share World with them it creates *Ego* as its representative, in shape of another *res extensa* equipped by devices known as senses, through which it can perceive other things and acts. Here I must point out something, namely: when I said *it can occur*, it was exactly what I meant, and there is no certainty that it must occur. Yes, it implies that the supreme spirit can act on caprice. The supreme spirit is not a machine.

A valid question would be whether the universal *res cogitans* could create more than one such representative. Of course, it could, but since I am trying to follow strictly the basic definition of solipsism, I must discard such answer. There is only *Myself*, my experience is the only experience, and presumed experiences of those *res cogitatae*, which my mind equipped with imagined power of thinking, are just projections of my thoughts onto them.

If it were not enough, in the continuation I will try to present more uncommon proposals, this time on the temporal dimension of *Ego* i.e. in plain text, how to explain my lifetime as a solipsist from birth, of which I have no memory, to uncertain death.

I think, I am, in other words, I live, there is no doubt. As a solipsist I must ask myself: *If I am the only existing being, was there any world before me and will be there any after me?*

I cannot remember my birth and earliest time after it. The reason is not only that it was quite some time ago, but the fact that there is nothing to remember since although I was born, i.e. my *Ego* created, with the capacity to memorize, my memory was empty. I cannot know how long I was in this state, what means that I really do not know the time of my birth. There is such triviality as a birth certificate, but in solipsistic world it is just another invention of my mind. The only thing I can rely on is that it was in the past.

During the lifetime I develop my experience, which certainly is influenced and limited by various factors, although theoretically it can be much richer. Though, there is an experience I definitely cannot obtain, the experience of death, which comes after the end of life, immediately but after. Since I cannot have the experience of death, can I really believe that it shall come? I can think of death, be afraid of it, but my only experience is life. What could be death? As we are in solipsist immaterial world, it must be something of mental nature. Before answering let me go back to the description of the time at my birth. My memory was empty. Thus, if my memory becomes empty and my memorizing functions turned off, I will return to the state like it was before my birth, i.e. to the state of non-existence, of death. In other words, terminal loss of functionality of memory means death of a thinking subject. Based on all this I can explain the difference between sleep and death, since when I am asleep my memory has not been erased or got dysfunctional.

The answer to who or what enables memorizing function, loads and erases my memory, the memory of *Ego*, is implicitly given through the presumption that *Ego* is the agent of *Absolute Ego* in my world. *Absolute Ego* by conceiving *Ego* equips it with the function to memorize and gives at least the initial input to the memory of *Ego* and after that throughout the whole life of *Ego* keeps control over it.

Another possibility is to assume death as the decision of *Absolute Ego* to eliminate *Ego* completely. Yes, this is possible, but not that easy. What means to *eliminate* in an immaterial world of thinking subjects, it even does not matter if there is more than one? It would mean that the thinking subject must forget something in order to eliminate it. With the assumed relation between *Absolute Ego* and *Ego*, it would not be very likely. I admit that it is not entirely impossible, but I am afraid that further discussion in that direction would be out of the scope of this document.

In between birth and death the quantity of inputs to my mind and results of their processing is gradually increased. Why I do not know what will happen in my life, although apparently everything is conceived in my mind? Why I cannot simply decide what happens? Some of the reasons have already been proposed in the text, so that what remains is to summarize their consequences. The basic one is the imperfection of any mind, even a supreme universal one. The first is that its creations, such as acting subjects and their actions, are equally imperfect. When I say that they are imperfect, in the first place I mean that they do not correspond to expectations i.e. conclusions of my mind. Therefore I must invest more mental efforts to correct the unsatisfactory situation the best I am able. Through such process my mind builds a system of logic. Somebody could say that, provided there is only one mind, it can impose any outcome as valid. Probably, but not very likely. First of all, being imperfect does not mean being unreasonable. When such mind has accumulated enough of its creations, most probably it will tend to put them and their interactions in some logical order. Again, being imperfect, it can bring a whole lot of outcomes, many of them needing correction and thus this process never stops. The net result is that, although I am the only mover of events in my life, I am not the absolute master of it and this is the way my whole experience is built. The experience is a construction of memorized creations of my mind and understanding of results of their interaction. As long as I live I cannot foresee what my experience could be and will be.

The above interpretation of life and death opens a way to further conclusion. Once the memory of *Ego* became empty and its functions switched off it could happen that *Absolute Ego* for any reason decides to make its memory functional again. *Ego* will be reborn, not reincarnated since it is immaterial, but the probability that it will be the same *Ego* is only a remote chance; this will not be Me as I am now. Reasons have already been given. To begin with, it cannot be

reasonably expected that inputs to the memory will be the same and in the same sequence. The processing of the information by the restarted imperfect mind will lead maybe even to the same assortment of conclusions, but not necessarily to the same choice of the final one. As a consequence a new system of logic will be established with further consequences, probably beyond capability of understanding through the logic of the dead *Ego*. Finally, a new image of the world will be created, a world of new *Ego*. For the sake of solipsism I keep assuming the new *Ego* is again the only one. Despite the denomination I do not feel at ease to speak about this new world as of mine. New *Ego* of the new world will acquire during its existence a different experience, which has nothing to do with mine.

## Conclusion

As I said at the very beginning exhaustive sources on solipsism are very scarce and after I had made the initial selection of philosophical texts, and studied them, I realized that for my interpretation Descartes and Fichte would be sufficient. It took quite some effort to follow as strictly as possible the way of solipsistic thinking, however absurd it might seem, in order to prove it is a subject worth discussion and, through such discussion, to try to design a model, the functionality of which could be tested. The unspoken presumption was that I would accept any conclusion. Anyway, I would not have the right to reject it, because even to an absurd theme, throughout the process I kept using the logic, which was meant to be a significant byproduct of my supposedly solipsist experience. Although sometimes I resorted to uncommon mental constructions, I dare believe that I arrived to reasonably acceptable results of my efforts. After all, treating absurd subject calls for methods apparently close to absurdity. The question remains how successful I will be in persuading others. A conclusion on this particular question can be drawn from this whole text in general with a more detailed explanation at the beginning of the chapter on model testing.

With the above in mind and for the sake of discussion, let me take for granted the world as a constantly expanding creation of my solipsistic mind in the course of my life. But will it bring a substantial change in my treating the world, will it solve any of the problems I encounter in this world, and will it answer my yet unanswered existential questions? It took me some time to arrive a satisfactory conclusion. Only a hint I got by leafing through Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, where he claims that at the end solipsism and realism are the same. I did not read Wittgenstein's elaboration on it, if there is any, but the instructive text on *Tractatus* by A. J. Ayer convinced me that I should find an explanation of my own.<sup>15</sup>

Once again, my mind with its unlimited potential of thinking almost incessantly on literally anything already invented and memorized or entirely new, by doing it imposes on itself a tremendous task. The amount of raw information is already beyond the limits of imagination; the amount of logical and illogical interconnections progressively higher and about the amount of possible

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<sup>15</sup> See 11 and 12

solutions is better not to try thinking. Some questions get answered, some problems solved, new ones continuously created and only an unimaginably perfect mind could master all this to full satisfaction of itself, not a real imperfect mind of mine. At the end, realistically thinking, it should not be taken as a lack of modesty, if a sworn solipsist admired a world of his or her making. But this is precisely the world I live in, the only world that I know, with everything I like or do not like, problems, questions and anything what belongs to commonly known life. Thus, even if solipsism were somehow proved as the framework within which our world is functioning, it would not substantially affect the reality.

Such a conclusion is definitely a climb-down from expectations of any overenthusiastic solipsist, which could have believed that the assumed power of free thought would necessarily make miraculous solutions just a matter of wish and will.

On the other hand, not only a realistic solipsist, let me call him or her so, but also an opponent of solipsism, can accept the conclusion without emotions, because the world remains to be according to their expectations.

Still, the whole discussion has not been just a sort of mental gymnastics. Through its very conclusion it proved once again that as much as we try to tread new paths in order to change completely or at least improve or even finalize existing philosophical interpretations of the world, more than often these paths through the woods lead back to the main road. By saying that I do not mean in the least that such efforts should be given up, but that the chances that they become a breakthrough are very slim. In this sense, just to finish the thought, although beyond the scope of this document, let me say as an example that after millennia we still try to perfect Plato and Aristotle mainly by finding new interpretations of their teaching.

To remain with the main subject, I must admit that as much as I find the conclusion reasonable, I became aware that the discussion by itself implicitly indicated that some of my initial assumptions could be modified. Still, although modified, I do not see that even in a modified form they would change the conclusion. Basically, it is about the definitions of two terms.

One of them I treated briefly in the paragraph on the attributes of *Ego*. There it was stated that a supreme, but imperfect thinking subject with human attributes

meant no god. Of course, this is still acceptable, but only if we refer to God as defined by contemporary monotheistic religions. However, if human qualities of, say, Greek polytheisms are attributed to a monotheist deity my assumption should be modified. Although insisting on this heretical thought would provoke angry reactions of all three monotheistic religions, it will not change the conclusion on solipsism.

The second item is much closer to our main subject and implies a contradiction to much of the reasoning in the paper. Although peripherally treated a few times, it remained hidden. It started with the question whether Descartes meant one or more *res cogitantes* and reappeared several times, e.g. when inquiring if, definitely contrary to Fichte, there could be more than one Ego, each one with its own solipsistic world. An affirmative answer would produce a new conception of something that could be named *multi-solipsism*, an oxymoron. Paradoxically, if accepted, it will not bring in a substantial change to the previously developed concept either. Sticking strictly to the original meaning ascribed to solipsism, it would ultimately mean that there are parallel solipsist mutually isolated worlds or, in common language, each of us lives in a world of his or her own.

But, then, is it not just an extension of the general conclusion? And does it really matter?

## Abstract

**Discussion on the notion of solipsism as an extreme of rationalism by reducing Cartesian dualism to the monism of *res cogitans* interpreted through a relation of Fichte's *Absolute Ego* and *Ego***

**Key words:** *solipsism, common sense, res cogitans, Absolute Ego, imperfect mind*

The thesis indicates conclusions to which one could arrive by abandoning the well trodden path of so called *common sense* and following to the extreme the rationalism of Descartes' *res cogitans* taken as a single existing *solipsistic* subject. This subject is an interpretation of *Myself/Ego*, according to Fichte conceived by *Absolute Ego*, which is pure *cogitans*, i.e. an action and not a subject, and therefore *Ego* in reality plays a role of an acting representative of *Absolute Ego*. Although *Absolute Ego* and *Ego* as its agent have unlimited potential, the resulting solipsistic subject is an *imperfect mind*, limited by consequences of its own creations and their interrelations, and not an omniscient and omnipotent deity.

Through a couple of examples, with an effort of reasoning to the limits of common sense, the functionality of solipsistic model was tested with the final conclusion that regardless of apparent absurdity and expectation of weird outcomes solipsism leaves our world as it is.



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