

Notes on solipsism

P.W. Adriaans,

Introduction.

Solipsism is a phenomenon that has played a modest role in philosophical theorizing since about 1700. Although few philosophers can be called 'Solipsist' in the proper sense, solipsism is treated in many publications as a serious consequence of certain epistemological, metaphysical and ethical positions. This often happens casually, without a thorough examination of the assumptions and concepts involved. One occasionally sees rebuttals of solipsism in publications, but these are usually based on some dubious definitions of what solipsism should be. The result is that quite a few and to my knowledge no recent publications are, engaged in a scientific analysis of the phenomenon of solipsism itself in a more comprehensive perspective of various disciplines such as history, psychology, logic, epistemology, metaphysics, anthropology etc. In this note I give an analysis of the origins and historical development of the term 'solipsism'. In the second part I continue with an analysis of the origins and historical development of the problem or phenomenon of solipsism.

The origins and historical development of the term 'solipsism'.

The development of the term 'solipsism' is closely related to the development of a group of other terms like 'egotism', 'egoism' and 'Egomism'. These words are relatively young and have emerged during the Enlightenment. In this period of philosophical innovation many neologisms were formed. Traditional philosophical terms are: ego, individualitas, persona. Terms derived from mysticism and rediscovered by the French quietists seem to have been particularly attractive: the prefix "ego" and suffixes like "-ismus" and "-ista". Some of these words found general acceptance. Important to us are : solipsism and egoism. The current general and internationally accepted meaning of these concepts emerged relatively late. Until the second half of the 19th century, the situation is unclear and we find big differences per country. All this indicates that the problem of solipsism in the history of philosophy arose very late. It's a philosophical position that apparently only recently entered the discourse.

The term 'solipsism' is probably formed from 'Solipsus' (Solis = only, ipse = self) which means 'Selfish'. This word is itself a neologism, and to my knowledge it does not occur before 1645 when it was first mentioned in a work entitled "Lucii Cornelii Europaei Monarchia Solipsorum" by G.Cl. Scotti. (Venice 1645). It is a satire on the Jesuits, and describes a realm of the selfish. 'Solipsus' is probably formed by analogy with Latin terms like 'philautia' and 'autophilia' with the meaning: selfish. The Greek 'Philautos' in the sense of 'Selfish' is already found in the Koine and occurs for instance in the New Testament. In 1652 the work of Scotti was translated in France as "La Monarchie des Solipses" and soon the term 'solipsistes' found entrance. What was going in France at the time exactly is difficult to reconstruct. There are several theses:

a) 'solipsist' was a byword for Jesuit. (Roll.)

b) There really has been a "sect" of solipsists. (Mencke, Wolff)

c) It is a nick name of the Jesuits for the followers of Descartes and Malebranche. (Vaihinger)

Whatever the truth may be, it seems at least probable that the term 'solipsiste' was not originally used as an indication of a serious follower of a philosophical theory. The term had more a satirical than scientific connotation. It is also unclear which of the two aspects of its meaning, ethical or metaphysical, was predominant, and whether a strict distinction between these two aspects was made. The rumor of a cult of egoists in Paris can primarily be traced back to Wolff. He probably referred to a group of people in France who were identified with the term 'solipsistes'. He used the term 'egoist' for a concept with a meaning much closer to our current meaning of term 'Solipsist' than the meaning of the term 'solipsist' as it was used back in France at that time. For Wolff 'egoists' are people who "von allen Dingen geleugnet, dass sie sind, doch das: Ich bin, zugeben." The theory that the term 'egoist' was forged by Wolff himself is wrong. He uses the word only after 1719, while in 1716 Mencke in Paris already speaks about 'Egoistae'. In 1714 Addison used in the 'Spectator', the word "egotism" to denote the tendency to talk a lot about oneself and often use the word "I". Addison's claim that he borrowed the word from the vocabulary of the Jansenists is probably wrong. Another term for our modern concept of 'solipsism' is found in 1727 in France in the form of the word "Egomisme" (A.M. Ramsay, *Les Voyages avec un Discours sur Cyrus la mythologie*). This is "Une espèce Pyrrhonisme the nommé l'Egomisme, ou chacun se croit être le seul existant". (Egomet = me myself). The French 'solipsistes' were also called 'egomets'. Next to 'Egomisme' one finds 'Egometisme' (1752 *Dict. de Trévoux*). The form 'solipsist' would probably have disappeared if Kant had not used the form 'Solipsismus' next to 'Egoismus'. I do not know whether Kant borrowed the term from the French or that the word "solipsism" was already used earlier in the German language. In the dissertation of 1770 Kant used, like Wolff, the term egoist: : 'Hinc mundus sic dictus egoisticus, qui absolvitur una substantia simplici cum suis accidentibus, parum apposite vocatur mundus, nisi forte imaginarius' (par.2). It is clear that he is referring to a form of solipsism. In his *Ethikvorlesungen* (1775-1780) Kant distinguishes "der moralischen Egoismus" (dass man sich im Verhältniss mit andern allein hochschätzt) from "der moralischen Solipsismus" (dass wir uns im Verhältniss mit andern allein lieben.) In "Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht" (1798) Kant gives the following overview: 1) Logischer Egoismus, 2) Ästhetischer Egoismus, 3) Moralischer Egoismus, 4) Metaphysischer Egoismus. The latter form of egoism is a precursor of the phenomenon that now is indicated with the word 'solipsism'. Kant's definition of the term "egoism" as an ethical concept gains acceptance. (Schleiermacher, Krug). In the writings of Schopenhauer the metaphysical connotation, however, still exists.

The influence of Kant in the conception of the modern notion of solipsism has been decisive. Not only is he responsible for the revival of the term, but he opened with conception of the transcendental deduction, with the interpretation of the 'I think' as a transcendental unity of apperception, the possibility of formulating the concept of solipsism without recourse to a Cartesian or an empirical theory of knowledge. Moreover his clarification of the relation between ethics and ontology allowed him to distinguish egoism and solipsism in their

modern sense. The current meaning of these concepts originated in the 19th century in Germany.

Schopenhauer distinguishes in 'Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung' 'Der theoretische Egoismus' (der ... alle Erscheinungen ausser seinem eigenen Individuum, für Phantome hält) from 'Der praktische Egoismus' (der... nur die eigene Person als eine wirklich solche, alle übrigen aber als blosser Phantome ansieht und behandelt). The egoism in Schopenhauer's writings still has both ethical and metaphysical significance. The term 'solipsism' first occurs in its modern sense in Müller: "De Solipsismo" 1841. 'Egoisme' has in the writings of Feuerbach ("Das Wesen des Christentums" 1841) a religious overtone: 'Der Egoismus ist wesentlich monotheistisch, denn er hat nur eines, nur sich zum Zweck'. This religious-metaphysical interpretation of egoism is taken by Stirner in "Der Einzige und sein Eigentum", Stirner is one of the first thinkers of which one can say unequivocally that he is defending a solipsistic position. With the so-called 'Zusammenbruch des deutschen Idealismus' the heyday of solipsism begins. The meaning of the term stabilizes under the influence of the work of Von Hartmann. Leerlingen van von Hartmann, (Volkelt, Drews) proberen een kennistheorie vanuit een solipsistische positie te ontwikkelen, een poging die in Nederland door Dèr Mouw wordt opgenomen. Pupils of von Hartmann (Volkelt, Drews) try to develop a theory of knowledge from a solipsistic start point, an attempt that was taken up in the Netherlands by Dèr Mouw. A similar development can be found in the work of Schuppe and von Schubert Soldern. While the meaning of 'solipsism' at the end of the 19th century is stabilizing, there is also a true boom of new subject interpretations'.

Already in the mid 18th century in France the word 'personalism' was in vogue to describe ethical egoism. 'Stendhal blows new life in to the term 'egotism' " Souvenirs d' égotisme' 1832" a word that is also found in Byron. In the literature we find, probably influenced by the extreme individualism of romanticism, more allusions to the solipsistic position. (Eg, Tennyson, Huysmans and in the 20th century Eliot, Beckett, Jünger). The beginning of the 20th century is characterized by an enormous complication of the subject-concept, caused by new developments in the humanities and philosophy. Words that are newly created or take new meaning include: transcendental ego (Husserl), ego, super-ego (Freud), Dasein, Subjektivität, Subjektivität, Existenz (Heidegger), Existence, cogito, cogito pré-réflexive (Sartre), personality, self, mind, I. me (symbolic interactionism), person, individual, etc. The only concepts that acquire an apparently value-free and generally accepted meaning in both the continental and the Anglo-Saxon philosophy, in this context are: solipsism and egoism. Thus the question can arise whether Husserl's transcendental ego is solipsistic, and whether an existentialist ethics is egoistic. But given the complexity of the modern subject interpretations one can doubt whether a value free objective definition of the notion of solipsism is really possible.

An analysis of the origins and historical development of the problem or phenomenon of solipsism.

Before I try to define some variants of solipsism I want to point out a fundamental methodological difficulty of this study. Since the work of Frege and Russell in logic we know that an uncritical use of the so-called naïve comprehension principle leads to paradoxes. The naïve comprehension principle tells us that we can use any descriptive attribute as the definition of a set. A well known description is 'The set of all sets that do not include themselves'. We all know that such a set is not well defined because it is self-contradictory. This leads in the philosophy of mathematics to the insight that descriptions like the 'set of all sets' are dangerous and should be avoided. Yet in the older philosophical, religious and mystical literature such universal descriptions are abundant. Moreover: their paradoxical nature is observed by the authors and actually interpreted as an indication of deep insight or universal truth. An example the well-known quote from Angelus Silesius: "I am like God and God is like me. I am as large as God. He is as small as I. He cannot above me nor I beneath him be." [Ich bin wie Gott, und Gott wie ich. Ich bin so groß wie Gott, er ist so klein wie ich. Er kann nicht über mir, und ich nicht unter ihm stehen.] Such descriptions prevent us from treating older metaphysical positions as consistent theories about the structure of reality in the modern sense. The same holds for the description of most Solipsistic theories: as soon as one conceives the individual consciousness in ontological sense as the only real existing entity a plethora of paradoxes (similar to the ones involving the set of all sets in philosophy of mathematic) immediately evolves. The incompleteness and groundlessness of experiences, the lack power to control reality, emotions like fear and anxiety in the individual consciousness immediately get an ontological interpretation in a solipsistic setting: being itself is essentially incomplete, anxious, torn in itself, groundless etc. Depending on one's philosophical position one can view these thoughts as deep mystical insight or utter nonsense, but the fact is that we cannot avoid such interpretations completely when studying the solipsism as a historical phenomenon.

In this context, it is useful to distinguish religious systems in which the fundamental unity of man and God is posed from real solipsism. Some ontological reduction of man and god to one principle may be necessary condition for certain forms of solipsism but it is not a sufficient one. In various religious systems the possibility of a mystic unity of the individual self and a monotheistic god is conceived. One finds traces of this notion in the works of mystical authors (e.g. Angelus Silesius), in various thinkers that were influenced by the neo-platonic tradition of the identity of micro- and macro-cosmos (Boehme), and in religious systems like the Advaita Vedanta. It is clear that, although these positions propose some unity between man and god, this does not imply that the ontological structure of the universe is *reduced* to the individual self. It is more the other way around: the individual consciousness is lifted up and loses its specific limited character: it becomes god-like. In fact this analysis allows us to formulate a working hypothesis for the analysis of the emergence of ontological solipsism:

The formal possibility of the ontological reduction of all phenomena to one principle is observed in many religious and philosophical systems. This formal possibility does not imply any qualitative description of such a first principle. In various systems the first principle might emerge as an unpersonal substance (to hugron, Herakleitos), an unpersonal god (Brahman), a mystic God (Angelus Silesius), etc. Only since the 19th century the specific interpretation of such a first principle as an

individual limited consciousness is found. This seems to be an indication of a profound change in the self image of individuals in western society.

In the wake of this development interpretations of a supreme being as essentially limited emerge: Schopenhauer's pessimism, Von Hartman's notion of a world spirit that deserves our compassion for being torn in itself and Nietzsche's conception of the death of god. Around this time an existentialist interpretation of the condition humaine as essentially finite is developed by thinkers like Kierkegaard. It is the aim of this study to create a better understanding of this phenomenon.

Before we continue, let's get some clarity in the terminological issues. I'll distinguish three basic solipsistic attitudes that are not mutually exclusive:

- 1) Epistemological solipsism is the position that all one can know for certain are the contents of one's own individual consciousness.
- 2) Ontological solipsism is the position that the only entity that exists is the individual consciousness and its contents.
- 3) Psychological solipsism is a dissociative disturbance, a mental state of extreme derealization and depersonalization.

The analysis above shows that from about 1700 the idea of solipsism is around, while the first real solipsistic theories appear round 1850. This raises the question whether in the history of philosophy positions related to solipsism were defended. This analysis reveals (at least as far as I know) that before Descartes the possibility of a solipsistic position is not defended or even conceived.

In the writings of Descartes and after him things are more complicated. Nevertheless, we can conclude provisionally that Descartes' cogito reflection constitutes a decisive breaking point, and opens the first opportunity to formulate a solipsistic view. Yet it still takes some 200 years before solipsism is taken seriously in philosophical literature. Here we ask the question: why does solipsism occur so late in history, and why the phenomenon is only known in modern philosophy? Why did the idea not even occur to the classical skeptical philosophers? Two theses are might be considered in this context:

- a) The dialogical character of the discourse in antiquity made the notion of an internal monologue (as a necessary condition for Solipsism) impossible.
- b) The entry in philosophy of Christian motifs such as, prayer, dialogue between man and God, grace, creation, redemption and the revival of these motifs by the Reformation against the background of the scholastic interpretation of creation as ens creatu makes an unprecedented radicalization of the skeptical position possible. One of the manifestations of this skepticism is solipsism.

Both theses are controversial, and certainly not true per se. Other factors to be considered might be:

- a) The effect of instrumentalization of cognition. (From the Renaissance)
- b) Influence of sociological and psychological factors (anomie, integration, individualization of society).

Possible topics: Indian philosophy, Socrates (Autarkeia) The skeptical schools in antiquity, Augustine (due foreshadowing cogito-reflection), Mystics (Angelus Silesius), Medieval skepticism, Montaigne (the so-called crise pyrrhonienne), Descartes , Bayle, Berkeley, Hume. Brouwer, Wittgenstein.