

Solipsism in the Darshanas

The Darshanas may be viewed with detached scholarly interest as a glimpse into the minds of a few ancient Indian philosophers, or they may be taken as affirmations of a living personal philosophy and used by the reader for his own benefit. Though my motive for publishing is to right the wrong that the true meaning of the Darshanas has been obscured by ancient editors and medieval commentators, my goal in reading them is that affirmation, and I am assuming this is the goal of the reader as well. If you are approaching these works in search of answers to the great philosophical question of your *own* existence, but you still want to verify them against modern philosophical authority, there is a certain caution to be taken here. The basic philosophy of the Darshanas is dualist, with one wing being the undeniable truth of the world as we already know it and live in it along with others, and the other wing being a combination of subjective idealism and solipsism, neither of which are accepted in modern philosophy.

1.) Solipsism is misunderstood

The solipsism, however, is not assessed there on its own terms. It is judged rather in terms of common-sense knowledge to be the nonsense that one's mind (meaning each one of the many minds that we all commonly acknowledge) is the only mind there is. But that hardly needs refutation. It is obviously wrong. Indeed it could be said that no such solipsism exists, and that for its critics, that notion that it does exist must be a straw-man proposition. A solipsist should not be seen as a physical human being, living among others, who entertains the notion that he is the only one with a mind. No such philosopher exists among others, and if he did, his assertion would be considered to be delusion and it would be disregarded.

Every sane person, even a solipsist, interacts with others as if they do have minds, which of course they do, in the "everyone" way of seeing things, and he knows it. By the actions of his body and the ordinary daily speech of his mouth, the solipsist proves his acceptance of the common-sense view, but he does not accept that his body is the self or the "I" he seeks to examine, so philosophically speaking he naturally would not think in terms of other bodies being somehow inhabited by such "selves" either. Furthermore, his solipsism is private and not public, even if he talks about it. It is known by the very nature of solipsism, that no one is out there trying to distribute it as a public theory. It can only exist as one of two distinct arms of a dualist philosophy. To think of it as a monism and as a public theory, is to misunderstand it as an easily refutable nonsense proposition..

2.) Proper Solipsism is a dualism

A more fair understanding of solipsism would be quite different. It is rather an inner contemplation that begins with the sense of "I", and proceeds to "I am aware" and then to "I am aware of", *without* considering the objects of awareness first (including the body) and without considering the awareness of others at all, simply because the one contemplating these things hasn't arrived there yet. Solipsism is a contemplation of the *order* of this process, that "I" comes first, that self-consciousness is prior to consciousness *of* things. In the Darshanas, this is presented as a question of what is primary vs. what is secondary, what is foundational vs. what is dependent, and what is causal vs. what is effect.

The inner contemplation that *starts* with consciousness is explored through meditation, whereas the communal, public, common-sense view is explored through logic and language. Those two modes of knowledge and the ways of exploring them are very distinct, and the point of the dualism is that both are valid, each in its own way, and that one does not negate the validity of the other. Dualism in general is a natural part of how we think. For example, many religious beliefs are completely inconsistent with scientific ones, but both are accepted together by religious people all over the world, and they don't find it problematic. Even in ordinary life there are hidden dualisms. When we say "I am happy," or "I am successful," or any of the countless other attributions to the ego, we don't mean "This body is happy," or, "This body is successful." We don't stop to consider in each case that it is actually just the brain computer updating data as to its present physical condition. Nor are we careful to constantly affirm *scientific* facts, e.g., that physical objects (including our brains) aren't solid, as they seem, but almost entirely empty space. If asked, we acknowledge that brain function is the entire extent of our conscious existence, but we don't think that way about ourselves at all. We all operate from day to day in a cloud of unacknowledged dualism.

3.) The dualism dismissed

No one would deny that his own awareness is known in one way, and the truth that others have awareness is known in a different way. The one way is direct and immediate and the other is by analogy. That is beyond question, because the two ways are clearly not the same, but for the purpose of ordinary living and indeed for ordinary philosophical examination, this difference is dismissed as irrelevant, and rightly so. The philosopher dismisses the odd fact that after *he* has worked within his own internal mental database of expertise for some time to solve a linguistic or an epistemological problem, for example, he emerges and then proceeds to propose that *we* mean such-and-such by an expression, or that *we* validate knowledge by such-and-such a method. You'll notice that I do the same thing in

my own writing here, and so does everyone, for that is the ordinary way. In the solipsist contemplation, however, the difference between "I" and "we" is not dismissed, and that is what makes it extraordinary. The solipsist believes that reasoned knowledge alone is not full knowledge, and that a theory of knowledge is incomplete if it disallows any contemplation that begins with self-knowledge.

4.) The dualism accepted

Thus in order to admit the forbidden solipsism, we have now established that it is a more acceptable dualism, and we can treat the solipsism of the Darshanas as a dualism. In fact, we are fully justified in that, because it is clearly and explicitly addressed as such in each of them, not as a monism. This makes perfect sense (if not common sense), for there simply must be more than one acceptable and true way to look at one's experience of the world, that is, there must be at least those two ways, because they are both irrefutable. This is the central and most crucial point to be understood here before we proceed. That "I" am not the body is a proposition that many intelligent and thoughtful people have expressed, but the notion of a self other than the body is another concept modern philosophy will not admit. So, as curious as it may seem, unlike the philosophies of the east that find their source in the ancient texts, modern western philosophy seems to disallow this one inquiry that most thoughtful laymen would expect of philosophy in general, the inquiry into the meaning of life and existence, beyond sorting mental brain-based events into those that represent a physical reality and those that don't.

5.) Modes of knowledge

Obviously, the most common way of knowing is just knowing daily life as it is lived from moment to moment: eating, drinking, working, relaxing, gossiping, etc., without any science, religion, or philosophy in mind, but that is not what we are concerned with in this inquiry. At a somewhat higher level, there is the science mode of knowledge, which deals with explanation and prediction involving physical entities and events, and there is philosophy, which explores the meaning of thoughts and beliefs, trying to distinguish the valid from the invalid. Religion explores spiritual reality, including the sense of eternality of the human spirit or *soul*. Incidentally, though it impossible to conceive of one's own non-existence, such a "concept" may be created by careless boolean negation, thinking that if an assertion indicates the existence of something as a positive reality, its negation may also indicate a positive reality, simply by applying some form of "no" to the assertion, without considering whether it actually works. Another example of this would be to think that our knowledge and power is limited, but God's is not.

6.) The problem with language

In the common modes of knowing, accepted here equally with the solipsist mode, human bodies do have minds as thoughts, feelings, beliefs, etc. There is no question about it, no wondering why those bodies may be assigned sentience by analogy but inanimate tables, for example, may not. Other bodies experience pain and pleasure but tables do not. Period. In the solipsist mode, however, only the thoughts and feelings of the thinker are present, indeed only *his* existence. Still, that statement is not quite adequate, because the word "only" reads "he and not the others", and others are not in this view at all. So to say that, for the solipsist, others do not have mind, is incoherent, because others are not considered at all. Even saying that others are not considered at all is inadequate, because *others are not considered at all*, and therein lies the problem. This is a very serious obstacle that the solipsist encounters in *expressing* his view. One cannot adequately express in language the solipsist state of mind, akin to the state of mind that underlies DesCarte's cogito. Even the single word that defines solipsism in the Yoga philosophy, *kaivalya*, meaning "aloneness" or "being the only one", can be wrongly interpreted as being merely apart from others.

Still, the solipsist must use language, public and common as it is. He must try to clothe his most intuitively certain knowledge in vestments belonging to the proponent of reasoning and common sense, who does not acknowledge his private sense. It is hard to express just how difficult this problem is. It seems that every word by which we try to express loneliness, privacy of experience, privileged knowledge, singleness, uniqueness, etc. is interpreted in *terms* of many: one (of many), privacy (from others), unique (among others), (off) by himself alone, etc. This makes solipsism unduly vulnerable to efforts at refutation, for though immediate personal present-moment experience is home for the solipsist, verbal analysis is home for the advocate of common sense who admits only common public knowledge. Thus the solipsist, even though he is not trying to establish a publicly shared truth, but only to structure his intuitive knowledge in words, seems to suffer the vulnerability of travelling in foreign territory.

Everyone knows the concept of needing to "gather my thoughts", or of privately structuring one's intuitive knowledge into a workable and savable format, in memory or even in a hard recorded medium. Once it is codified in that hard form, there should be no obstacle to allowing it to be seen by others, but with solipsist ideas, this sharing might be seen in itself to disprove the writer's assertion of privacy of knowledge, just as his very presence as a physical body among others, sharing the knowledge of direct sensory experience (like pain) by word and gesture seems to disprove the privacy of experience.

7.) The solipsist's motive

Motive is a most relevant consideration here. No solipsist aims to start a solipsist movement, or a religion, or its equivalent in academic philosophy, a consensus. A solipsist is someone who desires to satisfy a craving to make sense of his own existence and his place in the world, but not just in terms of everyday social life, not just as an expanded understanding through science, not through religion, and indeed not through the analytic approach of modern philosophy. In each of these fields there are hierarchies of expertise and authority, where in order to claim any knowledge it is required that one first accept the knowledge of others, but for a personal understanding of being itself, and of knowledge itself, it is required not necessarily to dismiss that, but to put it aside in favor of a solitary examination of the inner workings of one's own consciousness, including raw sensory perception (leaving aside explanations), memory, belief, labeling good vs. bad, joy vs. fear, etc. These things cannot be learned from others.

8.) Public and private

We are slaves to language. Anything learned must immediately be explained, and then the explanation—really just the confidence that we could explain or that we have just explained—actually becomes the claim to knowledge. Even so, language is indeed useful in structuring thought, through original composition or reading, but this would seem to put us into the public realm. The generally public nature of language, however, should not exclude it from private knowledge or experience, so the fact that the solipsist might speak, read, or write about it is not inconsistent with privacy. Even if, for example, one might speak of some mental content as being "mine" (disregarding the question as to just who this possessor is), it is said by refuters that this implies the existence of some other content that is not mine, and so must belong to others, and by that we prove the existence of other minds (which doesn't need to be proved anyway). Similarly, the idea of "expressing" a concept, seems to imply communicating it to others, and yet formulating a concept in words should be possible without that implication.

9.) Equivocation, inconsistency, and dualism

Unfortunately, the arguments against solipsism one often encounters tend to skip back and forth across that line, between including and excluding others, seemingly without recognizing the fallacy of equivocation, but the arguments in defense of solipsism seem to do the same thing! I cannot find a perfectly consistent marriage between the two, and from my reading of the Darshanas, the ancient authors couldn't either. Instead, our view is a coexistence of two mutually inconsistent views in such a way that the one complements the other instead of reinforcing or denying the other. Inconsistency is not acceptable in philosophy

either, but in this ultimate case, and only in this case, at the junction point between the two incompatible certainties, it must be accepted. This is the only such case I know of, but it is not unfitting because it presents itself at the pinnacle of self-awareness, where we find the very inception of knowledge, and it is only from that place on down, on either side of the duality, that consistency is the inviolable rule.

10.) The scientist and the solipsist

Now, if we have established that different modes of knowledge must be allowed, we may consider the relationship of two of those modes, science and philosophy. The scientific view (that in general we all must accept) is one of the distribution and constant flow of energy and particles of matter through time and space, and of the evolution of the universe from its state in a sudden beginning-time to its state in the present moment. In this mode of knowledge it does indeed make sense to trust the word of authorities who reason from data about the present state of the universe back to past causative events. But the solipsist is compelled to think also in the alternate way. He realizes that although in science we must deal with before and after, it must be admitted that when considering the entirety of existence, the words "before the beginning" make no sense. It is simply an improper use of language. Such a beginning would be the beginning of time, as well as matter and energy, and it also must be the beginning of the very laws of physics. He wonders how mathematically definable properties belonging to certain states of matter could suddenly emerge out of nothing, along with the laws that govern the behavior of particles of matter. So to him, the meaning of such a beginning in a before-and-after way of thinking is uncertain. The only thing that is certain to him is the present-moment *contemplation* of these properties, laws, causes, effects, mathematics etc., and the fact that this contemplation exists only in the mind, really only in *his* mind at that moment of contemplation.

11.) The scientist and the philosopher at odds

Branching away from the cosmic, our attention is narrowed to the planet earth, both in terms of the state of the mineral earth itself, along with the oceans and the atmosphere, and in terms of terrestrial life. In this last area, human life forms come to be examined, and it is here that I find certain inconsistencies with disciplines that explore thought and belief. These inconsistencies may easily slip by without examination, but such an examination is useful when assessing the claims of modern authorities in philosophy. In the following paragraphs I will attempt to identify and briefly examine some of these inconsistencies, and on the basis of the evidence that the scientific mode is distinctly different from the philosophical mode, to refute any claim that there should not be more than one correct mode of knowledge, namely the science/philosophy mode.

a.) The human automaton ponders his existence

To the hard scientist in all of us, a human being is strictly an organized system of particles of matter, rising from subatomic ones to atoms, molecules, cells, specialized systems of cells, and so on, all the way up to the human organism. Seen this way, a human being, even a philosopher, *is* an automaton, just as much as the simplest single-celled organism. We philosophers care about our understanding of reality, and some even care whether others understand properly, but it doesn't make sense for machines to care, except in the same way that a thermostat turns on the furnace because it cares that the temperature has dropped to a certain level. It is true that humans are social organisms, and that social organisms monitor and respond to the behaviour of other members of their group in a way that tends to ensure the well-being and furtherance of the group. But apart from basic cooperation and tolerance, one individual human automaton certainly should not care how others understand their relationship with the world, and whether the views of others are valid or not. Philosophy's quest for a commonly shared abstract understanding seems inconsistent with our belief in a purely mechanistic universe. It is very puzzling that we sophisticated survival machines should engage in philosophical debate over the nature of our existence.

b.) Progress in science, not philosophy

Most of us philosophers are respectful of the advance of scientific knowledge in the last few centuries. In fact, science, with its particular brand of proof by reason, is an important part of how we define ourselves as modern human beings, more advanced than people of the old world. This notion of advancement, of building knowledge step by step upon the achievements of our predecessors, is a hallmark of science, and we are so thoroughly enamored of this system that we tend to apply it as a model for other areas of human endeavor, even if they don't merit it. Philosophy is a good example of this. The image of teams of academic philosophers working on problems that have yet to be solved, like lab scientists hoping to make the next big breakthrough in human understanding, seems very odd to me. It seems arrogant to think that we have advanced beyond the contemplations of ancient thinkers whom we consider to be rather unsophisticated, and that we must now "work" on building our more sophisticated modern consensus of truth, following the model of science. Indeed the purest and most useful philosophy I have found was written some 2500 years ago.

c.) Evolutionism vs. philosophy

As for the "hard" stuff, the nuts-and-bolts reality of human automatons; scientists and researchers, including neuroscientists, sociologists, psychologists, and linguists, have that covered. They don't seem to need philosophers, and

anyway, philosophy should know its *own* place as the study of what human consciousness is, apart from the physical brain-state, apart from automaton reinforcing or correcting behaviors, or exchanging data through verbal signs, all with the unwitting effect of furthering endurance of the species. Philosophy should be known apart from its espousing a morality that is reducible to Darwinian survival by efficient cooperation, or an ideal society that is reducible to the efficient workings of a nest of ants. It should know its place as the study of what it really means to a human being to say that something exists, or of what it really means to say you know something, or ultimately, what it essentially means to say that you know *you* exist. This kind of knowledge is most certainly personal and private, not public, whether or not it is accompanied by the inner mental chatter of language, or even writing. It is discovered by the individual, alone in the present moment, examining the workings of his *own* consciousness and his own perception, knowledge, and beliefs, up close. It is not something that can be built up over time by standing on the shoulders of past giants of philosophical speculation. It is not like science in that way.

d.) The question of why

There is an inconsistency between the great philosophical question and scientific questioning in that we are so conditioned by the cause-and-effect thinking of everyday life and of scientific learning that we can only formulate the great question as "why?" or "by what reason?". The problem with this is not that the answer is evasive but that the question itself is unfitting. Modern science provides thorough and comprehensive answers to questions of "why?" in terms of hard physical reality, but not in relation to the nature of consciousness, because that is simply not within the scope of scientific inquiry. There was a time when philosophy allowed musings on the nature of consciousness, but it has since taken the impossible position of rejecting any system that is not consistent with the view of a human being as strictly a physical being, and mental activity as necessarily corresponding to the activity of the physical brain ... somehow. If proper philosophy is now defined as that, well so be it. I have no problem with that, except that it has stolen the name "philosopher" from any seeker of a different kind of knowledge that would address the meaning of his existence as apart from the workings of the physical universe.

12.) The language prison vs. the self-cognitive state

One particular characteristic of reason-based thinking is that it tends to become trapped in the philosopher's mental realm of language chatter that includes the inner dialog, reading, and even writing. It is like a mental prison where one cannot escape the relentless flow of words. Here the philosopher busily spins out

sylogisms to justify his own theories and to disprove those of others, rather than quietly examining his own wordless conscious experience. Even now, across the gap, I can hear the furious whirring of the prisoner's language machine composing indignant refutations to that observation. In my experience, this language prison lies between two other domains of mental content. The first is the unexamined drill of mundane life activity where the chatter does not normally occur, and the second is a cultured meditative state where it is deliberately avoided. This second state is one of raw unprocessed mental content, like primal unnamed and undefined sensory perception or the primal unexplained sense of being a conscious individual. In this meditation, one can see first hand how the present-moment reality instantly slips into memory, as if it never existed in the present, and where the certainty of immediate experience dissolves into something more like belief.

If the philosopher ventures there unaccustomed to that direct and immediate cognitive state, it may seem confusing and difficult to him. The experience might send him fleeing back to the familiar safety of the language prison where he conjures the ridiculous self-contradictory assertion that his consciousness of a self in that state only "seemed" to exist. But that self-cognitive state is where solipsism begins, and in my view, it is where philosophy should begin as well, not in the dubious realm of word constructs. Incidentally, for what it's worth, I can personally testify that for quality of life a combination of "just life" and meditation is the best, but being a philosopher, a critical reader, and a writer, I know the middle place all too well.

13.) Conclusion

In order to critically challenge solipsism (as I do every day), the thinker should be clear that he is challenging the idea, not the person of an adversary, and that he must himself form the same idea in his own mind in order to evaluate it. With solipsism, it is not a question of whether it is valid for his adversary to entertain the idea, but whether it is valid for him. It doesn't work to say that the adversary thinks he is the only one who has a mind, and then proceed from there. It is a consideration on the part of the thinker alone, as to whether it is meaningful to attach any importance to the fact that *his* present-moment awareness and his present-moment assumption that others have awareness are two distinctly different kinds of knowledge though the same in that they both exist in *his* mind. He must consider the fact that, try as he might, he cannot catch either the immediate awareness or the assumption actually existing anywhere else. It is equivocal to say, "I don't accept the idea of solipsism for myself, because it doesn't make sense that that author thinks he is the only one."

Neither is it helpful in examining such a uniquely private and personal contemplation to look right and left for the approval of other experts, trying to bolster one's attack with very authoritative-looking citations, or to try and gain credibility by asserting that no "great" philosopher has ever accepted solipsism. Again, this is not science. The evaluation of solipsism is not a team effort.

It is, however, a fair question to wonder why anyone would publish a defense of solipsism and then assert that he is not out to promote it as a public theory. The answer is that it is a *defense*, as a complement to self-affirmation, certainly not an appeal for public affirmation. To the solipsist it is not enough to revel in the positive, because he must answer his own inevitable doubts, even though consistency with his own beliefs would require that the person of his adversary be his own person. Surely, the solipsist should not be *denied* the expedient of writing for the purpose of structuring and developing his thoughts and allaying his uncertainties, simply because he would be seen to contradict his own thesis; and once allowed and once written, there should likewise be no injunction against publishing it. No one can publish his thoughts anyway, but only bits and bytes, or paper and ink. From there on, the thoughts are completely up to the reader.

In any case, the answer to the great question cannot be expressed in words nor learned from them, nor can it be derived from reasoning. It is a first principle, the cognition "I am aware". To say, as Descartes did, that consciousness is self-evident and bears no necessarily dependent relationship to a body has nothing to do with reasoning the existence of consciousness in others by analogy. All that is known by the philosopher in the "cogito" experience is the consciousness of the philosopher, and by the time any such analogy would occur he is out of the solipsist mode and into the common-sense mode where it is not even necessary to justify the notion of consciousness in others.

Descartes's starting point is the cogito, but his philosophy is said to have failed at the hands of more sophisticated modern thinkers reasoning in the safe public mode, from common sense to common sense, having shut out the special private sense of direct self-awareness. My philosophy, which is that of the Darshanas, fails as well according to that limited mode of thinking, and it is for the very same reason, that by the time the syllogisms start, one has shifted from the solipsist mode to the language prison of reasoning. That does not mean, however, that the cogito is not a good starting point. The cogito experience is rich with variety and possibilities for exploration, including human vocal sound as mental content, but not as verbal reasoning.

So in this and only this ultimately enlightening endeavor, let the reader examine his own awareness in the present moment. Let him abandon the timid deference to

trained authorities, thinking that somehow they must know far more than he does about the reality of *his* consciousness. Let him think beyond the shaky arguments in writings purporting to show that solipsism has no foundation. Those writings seek a very safe philosophy that doesn't deviate much from the common sense of all us ordinary non-philosophers, but that is not what we are looking for. If we are going to find satisfying answers to the question of our existence, let's not be "we" at all for a moment. Let's drop the words for once and just be the "I" that is found in meditation, or just the same, outside meditation, any time and any place. Indeed, there *you* are, the thinker of the thoughts, the believer in the beliefs, the experiencer of the color, the pain, the smell, or the sound, all in a dimension of awareness that exists in the before-state, just prior to when the experience snaps into the word realm where it is quickly given a name and an explanation. Apart from that busy realm of relentless word-thinking and explanations, there is a place where you are the only one, and where your experience does not depend on a physical explainable body. There is your solipsism, and it is safe, without timidity, without obeisance, and without uncertainty.

John Wells