

Early Wittgenstein's Alleged Solipsism

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Wittgenstein's early work is often taken to commit him to a form of solipsism. In this essay, I argue that such 'solipsist readings' (SRs henceforth) fail to provide a cogent and faithful account of Wittgenstein's early thought—by any ordinary, helpful definition of 'solipsism'—and that a 'non-solipsist reading' (NSR, henceforth) is preferable. I explain how a NSR accounts for various features of Wittgenstein's early thought. Ultimately, I conclude that labelling Wittgenstein a solipsist is incorrect under an ordinary definition of 'solipsism'; further, whilst 'solipsism' could be redefined to apply to him, doing so is misleading.

A note on the terms 'solipsism' and 'solipsist':

Wittgenstein's alleged (selfless) solipsism, it is best understood as the denial of that which is beyond my acquaintance.¹ As such (*secundum* Levine (2013)):²

(Solip): $\sim\exists y[\sim A(y)]$, where 'A' can be read as "I am now acquainted with ..." or "I know (*kennen*) ...". (Levine, 2013, pp.181, 190; Russell, 2001, p.44; Wittgenstein, 1999, 3.4; Wittgenstein, 1973, p.59)

For the purposes of our discussion, 'a solipsist' is one that holds this claim to be true (ineffably, vacuously, or otherwise).³

Firstly, Wittgenstein is not *straightforwardly* a solipsist; that is, he does not claim—nor does he commit himself to—that (Solip) both has sense and is true. Indeed, SRs generally accept this fact, but argue that Wittgenstein should still be considered a solipsist in another way. (Anscombe, 1959, p.162; Hacker, 2021, p.81; Pears, 1972, p.58; Potter in Zalabardo, 2024, p.113) For Wittgenstein, everything either has sense, is senseless, or is nonsense. Something with sense pictures a possible state of affairs, something that is senseless is legitimately constructed but does not say anything, and something that is nonsense is illegitimately constructed. (Wittgenstein, 1999, 2.221, 3.3, 4.611, 4.62) As, for Wittgenstein, (Solip) does not have sense, SRs must ascribe solipsism to Wittgenstein with (Solip) being *either* senseless *or* nonsense.

If (Solip) is considered senseless (tautologous), one might be tempted to label Wittgenstein a solipsist insofar as he holds (Solip) to be *vacuously* true. Such a view is alluring, for $A(x)$ —*if* one can understand it—seemingly 'precludes its own truth' for any x ; thus, (Solip) is

¹ Regarding 'selfless' solipsism: (Potter in Zalabardo, 2024, pp.116–118; Anscombe, 1959, p.168)

² SRs (generally) align with this definition. I discuss one notable exception later in the essay (see p.3).

³ Similarly, (Potter in Zalabardo, 2024, p.110). Here, 'true' is used maximally broadly, although this may need correction (see p.2).

seemingly tautologous (a conjunction of tautologies).⁴ (Levine, 2013, pp.191, 200) However, whilst, for Wittgenstein, understanding (Solip) *would* preclude its truth, one *cannot* understand (Solip). (Levine, 2013, pp.199, 201) Wittgenstein is committed to discarding the predicate A from language because it is not meaningful or useful within language. That is, by a's mention in any proposition, A(a) is *shown* and thus the predicate would be redundant.⁵ (Levine, 2013, p.202; Wittgenstein, 1999, 4.002, 5.4733, 6.2322) Here, Wittgenstein's use of Occam's Razor requires us to remove the predicate A from language (as he does with '='), and thus any propositions using A are not 'legitimately constructed', i.e. nonsense.⁶ (Anscombe, 1959, p.168; Levine, 2013, pp.189, 202; Levine, 2018, p.321; Wittgenstein, 1999, 3.328, 6.2322) Since (Solip) includes the (pseudo-)predicate A, it is *nonsense* (as is \sim (Solip)).⁷ Therefore, Wittgenstein does not hold (Solip) to be senseless and *vacuously* true.

Whilst understanding that, for Wittgenstein, (Solip) is nonsensical, many still classify Wittgenstein as a solipsist. Those that hold this view (mainly, proponents of a *Metaphysical Reading* of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (*Tractatus*, henceforth)) hold that (Solip) is an 'ineffable truth', and that whilst (Solip) cannot be said, it is rather *shown* to be true.⁸ However, claiming that there are unsayable truths, and further reporting *specific* unsayable truths (such as (Solip)) *is* simply to do metaphysics, which is antithetical to the spirit of the *Tractatus*. If we label some truths 'unsayable' or 'ineffable', and yet consider and discuss these truths as we would 'sayable' truths, then 'unsayability' becomes an insubstantive rhetorical flourish. (*Contra* Wittgenstein, 1999, 6.53, 7) Furthermore, any separation of truth from fact is problematic. (Wittgenstein, 1999, 1.1, 1.11) Wittgenstein's understanding of truth concerns propositions and their accordance with reality, and this collapses when considering 'non-propositional truth'.⁹ Perhaps one considers these problems surmountable, and that benefits of a Metaphysical-SR call for this. However, as I argue shortly, these alleged benefits are illusory.

⁴ Wittgenstein constructs the general (pseudo-)proposition ($\forall x[A(x)]$) out of elementary propositions (A(a), A(b), &c.). (Levine, 2013, pp.195, 199; Wittgenstein, 1999, 4.411 4.51)

⁵ Furthermore, 'I' would also be removed. (Wittgenstein, 1975, p.85; Levine, 2013, p.202)

⁶ "[L]egitimately constructed propositions" include propositions with sense and senseless propositions. That which is illegitimately constructed is nonsense. (Anscombe, 1959, p.163; Wittgenstein, 1980, p.112)

⁷ See (Levine, 2013, p.187)

⁸ Regarding the appeal of Metaphysical Readings see: (Anscombe, 1959, pp.162, 166; Hacker in Cavell, 2000, p.420; Hacker, 2021, p.81; Kremer, 2001, p.44; McGinn, 1999, p.491)

⁹ That is, *truth* and *sense* are inseparable (particularly for Wittgenstein), non-propositions are not *truth-apt*. (Levine, 2013, p.209; Passmore, 1961, p.7; Wittgenstein, 1999, 2.22, 2.222)

I have argued that, for Wittgenstein, (Solip) is neither *straightforwardly true*, nor *vacuously true*, nor *ineffably true*. This rules out his being a solipsist by our earlier criterion. Rather, he considers (Solip) *mere nonsense*. The question of solipsism is a nonsensical question, similar to ‘Is purple equal?’. However, some might still argue that Wittgenstein is a *linguistic solipsist*, insofar as he holds that there can be no facts that go beyond what is ‘given’ that can be *understood*. (Pears, 1972, p.58; Potter in Zalabardo, 2024, pp.113, 118–119, 123) Such a reading, though more sympathetic than other SRs, is misleading. It confuses the matter to label Wittgenstein a (linguistic) solipsist because of his commitment that non-solipsist claims cannot be understood, when (Solip) can similarly not be understood. Whilst ‘linguistic solipsism’ can technically be applied to Wittgenstein, the use of the term ‘solipsist’ carries implicit connotations—namely, that ‘what is given’ refers to ‘*my sense data*’ or equivalent, as in Russell’s view. However, Wittgenstein plainly denies this. Rather, what is given (what is *shown*) is ‘objects’. (Hacker in Block, 1981, p.89; Levine, 2013, pp.191, 204) Thus, whilst ‘linguistic solipsism’ is technically applicable to Wittgenstein, such a label adds unnecessary confusion; the prior connotations of ‘solipsism’ make one more likely to stumble into *strictly incorrect* interpretations of Wittgenstein’s thought.

The aforementioned ‘advantages’ of Metaphysical-SRs are perhaps most commonly framed as difficulties or disadvantages that apply uniquely to NSRs. However, these difficulties are manifestly surmountable.

Firstly: ‘Wittgenstein’s remark, 5.62 (*Tractatus*), is evidence enough to label him a solipsist, as he says what solipsism ‘means/intends/&c.’ is *quite correct*’.

The remark 5.62 does not threaten NSRs as one might claim.¹⁰ Wittgenstein is not, nor should he be—as previously argued—claiming any ‘correctness’ of the cardinal claim of solipsism (i.e. (Solip)). (Hintikka, 1958, pp.2, 5) Rather, he is claiming that solipsism is ‘correct’ in its subsequent behaviour and method. That is, what a solipsist gets ‘correct’ is their refrain from attempted discussion of other minds, or things with which ‘I’ am not acquainted. (McGinn, 1999, p.494; Wittgenstein, 1975, p.85; Moore, 2016, 5:28) In fact, methodologically, solipsists simply take what is given and state relations between those given objects (though they are still mistaken in claiming that they are the ‘only mind’, or that what is given is ‘my own’, &c. (...for that would be *nonsense*)). Solipsism, though by no means correct *as a*

¹⁰ Consider (Pears, 1972, p.58)

claim, is ‘correct’ in its recognition of (that is, refusal to go beyond) the limits of language. This also addresses Wittgenstein’s claim that “solipsism strictly carried out coincides with pure realism”. (Wittgenstein, 1999, 5.64) The realist is given a set of objects and they investigate which propositions correspond with reality, as does the solipsist. However, this is a correspondence in behaviour, not in *truth*. This mistaken understanding—that 5.62 is an admission of solipsism—is furthered by the claim “that the world is my world”. (Wittgenstein, 1999, 5.62) However, as I understand it, 5.62 only *seems* to be solipsistic due to its linguistic form. This remark should be understood as *equivalent* to ‘that my world is the world’. That is, the order of ‘my world’ and ‘the world’ can be reversed (as ‘is’ (identity) is symmetrical). Considering this, we need not associate this remark with the ‘shrinking’ of scope associated with solipsism. The form of 5.62 has caused confusion, as upon reading it one first thinks of ‘the world’ (in which they typically include ‘things beyond their acquaintance’) and *then* they read that this conception ought to be ‘shrunk’ to ‘my world’.¹¹

Secondly—a more targeted critique of NSR: ‘Showing that solipsism is *mere nonsense* is insufficient evidence that Wittgenstein is not a solipsist. The *Tractatus* itself is wholly nonsense, but surely Wittgenstein is a tractarian’.

I believe intuitions of this sort are the primary cause for Wittgenstein’s solipsist label. However, Wittgenstein is not a ‘tractarian’: He does not hold the *Tractatus* to be true, nor ‘subscribe to its ideas’, but merely authored it. The *Tractatus* affects those who read it *despite* its lack of truth-aptness.¹² The *Tractatus* does not teach us truths, but rather affects and guides our behaviour. This counterintuitive—indeed, allegedly ‘paradoxical’—conclusion is avoided by Metaphysical-SRs, but the problematic nature of this conclusion is largely exaggerated. (As in McGinn, 1999, p.496) There is no reason to presuppose that truth-aptness is a precondition for affecting our behaviour. Indeed, this is demonstrably not the case, as we are affected by a gust of wind, a musical note, a loud crash, &c.¹³ Therefore, supposing Wittgenstein is not a tractarian (nor a solipsist) is unproblematic.

In conclusion, Wittgenstein is not a solipsist. However, this does not mean he is ‘not a solipsist’ in the same way that most others are ‘not solipsists’. For example, Russell considers (Solip) to be meaningful, and \sim (Solip) to be more plausible, and in this sense is ‘not a

¹¹ Relatedly, Techio notes the identification of the world’s limits with language’s limits. (Techio, 2014, pp.342, 363)

¹² The *Tractatus* does not directly express thoughts; it is nonsense. (McGinn, 1999, p.495; Wittgenstein, 1999, 6.54)

¹³ See (Kelly, 1995, pp.568–571; Wittgenstein, 1965, pp.1–6) regarding solipsism and ethics.

solipsist'. In contrast, Wittgenstein regards (Solip)—and thus, \sim (Solip)—as altogether nonsensical, and in this sense by our criteria is strictly 'not a solipsist'. That is, Wittgenstein is not an anti-solipsist (like Russell) but simply 'not a solipsist'. However, Wittgenstein does encourage us to act similarly to solipsists in refraining from (pseudo-)propositions about that beyond what is given (including denying their existence).¹⁴ Due to the *Tractatus*'s resistance to unanimous interpretation and its deeply systematic nature, it is vital to properly explain the individual aspects of Wittgenstein's early thought and their significance. This is my main contention. If one is adamant that Wittgenstein is a 'solipsist' (by some definition of 'linguistic solipsism' or some peculiar use of the term) then I do not begrudge them. They are not *incorrect* in any strict sense. What is most important is one's *understanding* of Wittgenstein's thought and how his early writings interact. The labelling of these thoughts is secondary. That is, our language ought to be somewhat standardised to avoid confusion and to make our work easier. This is my further contention, one that is admittedly lesser than my main concern. While it is not *incorrect* to label Wittgenstein 'a solipsist' when 'solipsist' is defined in some peculiar manner that applies to Wittgenstein, it adds unnecessary confusion and commitments, and should be avoided where possible.

¹⁴ Analogously, one may encourage us to 'Treat everyday as though it is your last' without any commitment to believing that today is in fact one's last.

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