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Solipsism and Self-Reference

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I. Introduction

In this paper I want to propose that we see solipsism as arising from certain problems we have about identifying ourselves as subjects in an objective world. The discussion will centre on Wittgenstein's treatment of solipsism in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In that work Wittgenstein can be seen to express an unusually profound understanding of the problems faced in trying to give an account of how we, who are subjects, identify ourselves as objects in the world. We have in his compressed remarks, the kernels of a number of arguments which all come together to form what can be called the problem of self-identification. I want to argue that the solipsism of the *Tractatus* arises at least in part as a solution to, or – to put it less optimistically – as a symptom or articulation of this problem.

In approaching Wittgenstein's early discussion of solipsism in this way I will obviously be in disagreement with some other interpretations of the work. For example, there are those who think that there is no 'solipsism of the *Tractatus*'.¹ In fact, the Tractarian arguments presented below as motivating solipsism have been seen as fulfilling the quite opposite function of refuting it. I do not intend in this piece to engage with alternative interpretations. Let me say a little bit about why I have granted myself the licence not to do so. First, the focus of my concern with solipsism is on how it connects with what I have called the problem of self-identification. While it is a concern that emerged in an attempt to make sense of Wittgenstein's remarks in

the *Tractatus*, if it turns out that there has been a distortion of Wittgenstein's thought, then so be it. The hope is that there has nevertheless been salvaged a line of thinking that is of interest. Connected to this is the fact that it would be something of a misdescription to say that what is being attempted here is a true interpretation of Wittgenstein. I am content – as can seem almost inevitable when confronting Wittgenstein's work – to use it and explore it rather than interpret it.

Second, Wittgenstein claims that anyone who understands what he has said will recognize his remarks as senseless. As the materials we use to come to such a recognition of senselessness must come from the work itself we can – with a straight face – take Wittgenstein to be refuting the very doctrine that we would, if ignoring the recognition of senselessness, take him to be advocating. But we must be wary of letting our doubts about the credibility (or even *respectability*) of solipsistic claims lead us to take his protestations of senselessness to count as part of a refutation of solipsism but not, equally, as part of a refutation of, for example, the presuppositional status of logic. Thus whilst of course it may be that, within the bracket of senselessness, we have a refutation of one but not the other, it is a justified starting point to see whether we cannot find in the *Tractatus* material that seems to force us towards solipsistic claims.

II. An Argument for Solipsism.

What is one to say if one thinks that there must be a place for the self, for a representing subject, and yet cannot explain how we could represent that subject if it were within the world. If one also holds that it cannot be outside the world – since nothing can – one is going to struggle to say something like: Well, then it must somehow be *of* the world if not in it, it must be a *limit* or a *condition* of the world. We

have here a form of argument for solipsism of the kind suggested by Wittgenstein.

Let me try to fill it out:²

1. *Everything in the world can be represented.*

‘Propositions can represent the whole of reality.’ (4.12)

‘The world is completely described by giving all elementary propositions, and adding which of them are true and which are false.’ (4.26)

‘Empirical reality is limited by the totality of objects. The limit also makes itself manifest in the totality of elementary propositions.’ (5.5561)

2. *That there is a representing self is a precondition of (the possibility of) representation.*

‘To perceive a complex means to perceive that its constituents are related to one another in such and such a way.’ (5.5423)

‘*The limits of my language* mean the limits of my world.’ (5.6)

‘The world is *my* world.’ (5.62)

3. *The world is (must be) represented.*

‘The world is *my* world.’ (5.62)

Therefore:

4. *There is (must be) a representing self. (2&3)*

‘What brings the self into philosophy is that fact that “the world is my world”.’ (5.641)

5. *The self cannot be represented.*

‘If I wrote a book called *The World as I found it*...[the subject] alone could not be mentioned in that book.—’ (5.63)

‘Where *in* the world is a metaphysical subject to be found?’ (5.633)

Therefore:

6. *The self is not in the world. (1&5)*

‘This shows too that there is no such thing as the soul - the subject, etc.- as it is conceived in the superficial psychology of the present day.’ (5. 5421)

‘There is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas.’ (5.631)

‘The subject does not belong to the world.’ (5.632)

7. *There can be nothing outside the world.*

‘So we cannot say in logic, “The world has this in it, and this, but not that”.’ (5.61)

[8. *Even if there were something outside the world, the world could be nothing to it.*

‘If there would be a logic, even if there were no world, how then could there be a logic given that there is a world.’ (5.5521)]

Therefore:

9. *The self is not outside the world. (4&7)*

10. *The self does not belong within the world but is a limit of it, or coincides with it in its entirety. (4,6 & 9)³*

'I am my world.' (5.63)

'The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world.'
(5.632)

III. Tractarian Substantiation

1. *Exclusion of the self from within the world.*

It seems to me that in considering the above argument the most important claim to focus on is the assumption that the self cannot be represented. It is clearly contentious. Only the propositions that the self is not in the world and that the self is a limit of the world are more problematic; but they stand as conclusions which rest upon the assumption of the non-representability of the self. So not only is that assumption contentious, it is also pivotal. It is my view that the considerations which Wittgenstein brings to bear in favour of this assumption bear the weight of the resulting solipsistic conclusions. It is in this way that we arrive at solipsism as a result of coming to appreciate the depth of the problems we face in giving an account of self-representation or self-reference. It was, the suggestion is, the fact that Wittgenstein was unable to see how we could, given these problems, avoid concluding that we cannot represent or refer to ourselves, that led him to equate self and world.

In considering the above argument we might think that we should focus not on the non-representability assumption but rather on the opening assumption of the argument. We might think that it is this assumption that bears the main responsibility

for the solipsistic conclusion. So before going on to present the arguments I take Wittgenstein to have identified for the non-representability assumption, it is as well to make clear why the opening assumption should not be the primary focus of our concern. First, we do not really need the universal assumption that everything is representable to reach our conclusion. All we need is the weaker assumption that were the self in the world it would be representable. The Kantian thought of self-consciousness as essential to selfhood would give us this straight away. Second, and more interesting, what would lead us to concentrate our consideration of the argument on its first premise would most likely be the thought that the premise embodied an idealist assumption.⁴ If we could show that the first premise was idealist, we would straight away reduce the power of the argument and thus reduce the status of the solipsistic conclusion. If all we had here was an argument from idealism to solipsism it would not perhaps overly excite us. It is the possibility of something like a transcendental argument for solipsism which seems both worrying and enticing. However, *prima facie*, there nothing obviously idealist about the claim that everything can be represented. It seems to be a shared assumption of early analytical philosophers that reality was intrinsically representable: in all its objective and mind independent glory it lay ready to be described. It need be no more an idealist assumption than that made by modern naturalists that there could be a complete science that we could understand and which describes and explains the whole world and its happenings. (Of course, if one takes scientific theories to be conjunctions of propositions the former view collapses into the latter.) The point is that one can remain a realist about the world to the extent that that means taking the world to be ontologically mind-independent, whilst holding certain assumptions of a harmony between the nature of the world and our capacities for representing it, which lead us

to assume that the world is thoroughly representable. To assume otherwise would be to assume that a degree of scepticism is a necessary concomitant of realism. Perhaps one way to construe the representability assumption that makes it obviously consistent with realism is to understand it not so much as claiming that we will in fact be able to come to understand everything but as claiming that nothing can be a priori *non-representable*. One does not need to think that the world necessarily outstrips our grasp in order to be a realist. Indeed to the extent that we were committed to such necessities we may seem to have given up precisely the advantage in lack of metaphysical baggage that the realist can seem to have over the idealist.⁵ The above remarks are not of course sufficient to rule out the possibility of there being an argument to the effect that assumptions of harmony between world and representing subject do in fact already presuppose idealist commitments and that some scepticism *is* a necessary concomitant of realism. The point for now is that the representability assumption seems *prima facie* not to contradict realist intuitions and thus leaves us with what promises to be a really interesting argument, rather than merely a move from idealism to solipsism.

Having decided to concentrate on step (5) of the above argument let me now turn to ask why anyone would think that the self is non-representable. Wittgenstein provides us with the material from which we can identify and develop at least four distinct, though obviously connected and not independent arguments, for that claim.

Argument from Psychological Ascriptions: Wittgenstein's discussion of the self starts with his analysis of propositions of psychological attribution, that is, with propositions of the form 'A *F*'s that *p*' where *F* is a psychological predicate. His discussion of such forms takes place in the remarks (5.541 – 5.5423) that stand as

elucidations of 5.54. Remark 5.54 is a claim of the truth functionality of propositional form. It says:

5.54 In the general propositional form propositions occur in other propositions only as bases of truth operations.

Such psychological reports are obviously of interest because they stand as seeming counter-examples to the truth functionality claim made by 5.54. This is what leads Wittgenstein to consider them. But they are also of interest because their proper analysis results in an argument the conclusion of which is that there is ‘no such thing as the soul – subject etc. – as it is conceived in the superficial psychology of the present day’. By this Wittgenstein seems to mean that there is no subject in the world that is the subject of psychological states. Wittgenstein says:

5.541 At first sight it looks as if it were also possible for one proposition to occur in another in a different way.
Particularly with certain forms of proposition in psychology, such as ‘A believes that p is the case’ or ‘A has the thought p ’, etc.
For if these are considered superficially, it looks as if the proposition p stood in some kind of relation to an object A .
(And in modern epistemology (Russell, Moore, etc.) those propositions have actually been construed in this way.)

5.542 It is clear, however, that ‘A believes that p ’, ‘A has the thought p ’, ‘A says p ’, are of the form “‘ p ’ says p ”: and this does not involve a correlation of a fact with an object, but rather the correlation of facts by means of the correlation of their objects.

Wittgenstein, I suggest, starts with the thought that psychological reports of this kind report that A represents p in some way. And his adherence to the picture theory leads him to conclude that p is represented by ‘ p ’ where ‘ p ’ is taken to be a propositional sign that is as complex as the fact that can be represented by it. Thus if such psychological reports are reporting a fact in A which represents the fact that p , they are properly analysed as being of the form “‘ p ’ says that p ’. The thinking here demands that the propositional states of a subject be representations in some sense. If

we accept this we are led to the conclusion that *A* must be as complex as each fact which *A* represents and as complex as all the facts which *A* represents. (A vivid way to bring out this point may be to consider it in terms of Fodor's language of thought. If having a propositional attitude involves tokening a complex structure – which realizes a sentence in the language of thought for example – then the subject must be at least as complex as that structure.) But from this demand for complexity

Wittgenstein concludes:

5.5421 This shows too that there is no such thing as the soul – the subject etc. – as it is conceived in the superficial psychology of the present day. Indeed a composite soul would no longer be a soul.

Now why should this be so? Why cannot the subject or soul be just as complex as all its thoughts – why cannot it be precisely a composite of those structures which represent the propositions it believes, thinks etc.? One thing that Wittgenstein surely means to bring out is the fact that unless the component parts are accessible to *one* subject then there is no sense in which we have a psychological state. If a group of people were each given a piece of paper with one word on it, then even if all the words together could be taken to form a sentence there is no sense in which a proposition is being understood.⁶ The ascription of mental states goes hand in hand with some supposition of a unity of consciousness. That is, with a unified first person standpoint. Similarly, we need to bind not only the elements of one mental state together, but also different mental states, if they are to be attributable to the same experiencing subject.

However it is still not clear why these demands for unity are taken to rule out complexity. Is it not open to us to give an account of the subject of psychological states as having component parts combined together to form a unity which allows it to be both a representer of propositions as well as unified experiencing subject? Yet

Wittgenstein's thought seems to be that whatever is required for a subject to have the requisite complex structure is going to contradict the supposed unity and *vice versa*. It is not just that some third personal principle of composition or combination is required to unify the complex of representations and so make the representing subject a *subject*; the requirement is that the complex be unified *from a first person standpoint*. Wittgenstein takes it that in order for that to be the case the standpoint can be treated neither as comprised of the complexity, nor as merely another element of it – neither option would solve the problem. It is the need to postulate, if meaning is to be possible, a first personal standpoint or point of view that is distinct from, but has access to the complex of representations that results in the claim that a composite soul would no longer be a soul. The prior first person standpoint, and not the complex of representations, will then come to be seen as the true subject.⁷

The above line of thought suggests a way in which one might be led from the consideration of psychological reports to the sceptical conclusion about the subject. Furthermore, the explanations suggested above of both 5.542 and 5.5421 are supported by Wittgenstein's remark at 5.5423. This remark closes his discussion of psychological reports and the startling conclusions that result from their analysis. He says:

5.5423 To perceive a complex means to perceive that its constituents are related to one another in such and such a way.
This no doubt explains why there are two possible ways of seeing the figure

as a cube; and all similar phenomena. For we really see two different facts.

(If I look in the first place at the corners marked *a* and only glance at the *b*'s, then the *a*'s appear to be in front, and *vice versa*.)

This remark is revealing in a number of ways. Were I to be rash, I would claim that it is pivotal to understanding Wittgenstein's position on the self both in his remarks at the 5.54s and in his later remarks in the 5.6s. It is clear that we are presented here with a model of what is involved in representation in general. As in his later and more often discussed remarks (for example, 5.633 'You will say that this is exactly like the case of the eye and the visual field...') Wittgenstein illustrates his model of the relationship between a subject and the world it represents by appeal to visual perception. The remark also fits well with the explanation just provided. In order to perceive a complex represented by *p* there needs to be a point of view – in this case a visual point of view which assembles the parts into a unified representation. That what we have is an assembling and not merely a reflection can be seen by the possibility of an aspect shift – first taking it one way then another. However, this remark also leads us a bit further. The remark does not only indicate the need for a distinct first personal viewpoint from which understanding can occur, a view point from which a complex can be taken to be a unity by the apprehension of the relations between its constituents, it also has direct consequences for the representability of the subject. The rationale for the supposition that the first person viewpoint must be distinct from and independent of the complex of our representing states rather than constituted in some way out of them only really becomes clear when we consider the case of self-representation. Let me try to bring this out.

Suppose that there could be a complex self, then the only self to be encountered in experience would be complex enough to sustain thoughts, perceptions and so on. But according to the model given, perception, and therefore representation,

of that self by the self would require that the various elements of the complex be taken as related thus and so. However, that necessitates a distinct first person view point from which the constituents of the complex are taken as related thus and so. Therefore, the self must be complex in order to represent the world, but a complex self could not represent itself.

In the argument derived from these remarks we see, I think, the core of the reasoning behind the claim that the self cannot be represented, which in turn precludes the self from the world. However, let me now move on to identify a second argument that the *Tractatus* seems to present us with. This argument has in fact largely been covered in the preceding discussion.

Argument from Non-Observability: Wittgenstein like others before him was struck by the fact that the subject of experience is not to be met with in experience:

5.633 Where *in* the world is a metaphysical subject to be found?
You will say that this is exactly like the case of the eye and the visual field. *But really you do not see the eye* [My italics].
And nothing *in the visual field* allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye.

There are a number of ways in which we can take the remarks on the unobservability of the subject. Given the analogy already indicated between visual perception and representation in general, we can take such remarks as expressing a conclusion to the effect that the subject is not only non-observable but also non-representable. And we would be justified in doing so. However, it seems to me that Wittgenstein's remarks indicating the non-observability of the self stand not just to provide a statement of the view that the self is non-representable but also to give us *reasons* for such a view. We can take the remarks to be doing this in two ways. First, one of the central ways in which we are able to come to represent objects in the world is via our perception of

them. If we are unable – in fact and in principle – to perceive ourselves we are then blocked from explaining the possibility of self-representation by appealing to our senses. Second, the remarks about perception can be taken to apply not just to *external* perception but also to any supposed quasi-perceptual *introspective* capacity. So, we can appeal to neither an introspective nor an ‘extrospective’ acquaintance with ourselves in order to underwrite self-representation. We have, therefore, reasons for being sceptical of the possibility of self-representation that flow from the non-observability of the self. Now to the third argument.

Argument from Contingency: Directly after the remarks just quoted we can find a more general argument as to why experience could not furnish us with a representation of the self – either directly or indirectly. Following 5.633, quoted above, he says:

5.6331 For the form of the visual field is surely not like this:

And he goes on:

5.634 This is connected with the fact that no part of our experience is at the same time a priori.
Whatever we see could be other than it is.
Whatever we can describe at all could be other than it is.
There is no a priori order of things.

What if we *were* to come to know and represent the self by experiencing it, or observing it? What if the visual field did have a form like that? One thing that it would mean was that there was an element of our experience that was ever present – we could not sometimes experience the world without the self being present and at

other times with it.⁸ Indeed, there being a subject of experience is taken as a precondition of all experience; knowledge that there is a subject of experience is not furnished by this or that experience. In this sense it is a priori. If, therefore, the subject *were* such as to be known through experience – it would be an a priori element of what is experienced. Similarly if the subject were *inferred* from what is seen or experienced directly then the subject would be *always* inferable from what is experienced directly and would be in the same way a priori. Also if the subject could always be inferred, as it would have to be if it was known through inference at all there would have always to be parts or aspects of experience which legitimated that inference. Those parts or aspects of experience would also have to be a priori. Further, Wittgenstein clearly holds that the above claims to a prioricity would contradict the contingency of what we experience directly and of what we describe. So, in brief, the argument from contingency that I take to be presented is as follows:

1. Everything known to us via experience is contingent.
2. If we knew the self through experience it would be a priori.
3. If anything is an a priori part of experience then it cannot be a contingent part of what is experienced.
4. If the self is known through experience then it cannot be a contingent part of what is experienced.
5. Therefore the self is not known through experience.

In looking for the rationale behind the third assumption – the claim that excludes a self known a priori from being a contingent part of experience – we need not conclude that Wittgenstein relies here on any simple assumption of the mutual entailment of a prioricity and necessity. Rather the central linking thought seems to be that what we experience can be contingent only if we could experience things differently. It is this

that closes off the possibility of the a priori being a contingent part of experience.

Thus, the argument for the third assumption can be taken to be as follows:

1. If everything we experience is contingent then everything we experience could be experienced as being other than it is.
2. If there were anything which was an a priori part of experience then we could not experience things as being other than they are in a way which did not include that thing.
3. If anything is an a priori part of experience then it cannot be a contingent part of what is experienced.

I have concentrated above on the general form of the argument from contingency.⁹

However, I take Wittgenstein in 5.634 also to be presenting more specific arguments against the possibility of the self being identified by acquaintance (i.e. perceptually) on the one hand or by description on the other. Everything we are acquainted with is such that we might not have been, and everything we can describe could have been otherwise.¹⁰

Let me now move on to a fourth argument for the non-identifiability or representability of the self. I will call it the argument from externality.

Argument from Externality: Some versions of an argument from externality appear very often in discussions that try to give us a sense of the necessary elusiveness of the self. It is in fact very hard to track down the backing for, and therefore the plausibility of such arguments, and I am not here going to do much more than gesture at their general form. The arguments I have in mind in talking about arguments from externality are those that conclude that the subject cannot be captured by the systems it has for identifying, representing and knowing its world, because the subject is in

some way external to the means that it has for identifying, representing and knowing its world. Its externality is very often thought to be the result of it being in some sense the source of those means. Thus Merleau-Ponty:

I cannot conceive of myself as nothing but a bit of the world, a mere object of biological, psychological or sociological investigation. I cannot shut myself up within the realm of science. All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge is gained from my own point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. (1962, p.viii).

In Wittgenstein we can see, as many have noted, something like the same general reasoning. Wittgenstein has been taken to hold that a system of representation has to be understood from a point of view that cannot be captured in that system. Now this thought can be taken in two ways. First, and most simply, it can be taken as the conclusion resulting from the failure to explain the possibility of self-representation. But it can also be thought of as providing a further reason for the claim that the self is unrepresentable. That is, we can see the subject as excluded from the system of representation on the basis of a failure to explain its possible inclusion; however, we can also see the nature of representation and of the representing subject as such that the subject is bound to be external to that system of representation of which it is the representing point of view. It is my suspicion that this line of thought inherits much of its plausibility from a kind of argument by analogy. We will find almost unavoidable the thought that the subject is bound to lie beyond the means it has for representing its world if our general model of representation is construed in analogy with visual perception. If in order to identify anything we have need of a *point of view* from which identification takes place, then it will not be surprising if we cannot identify this point of view.¹¹

We have seen above four overlapping, and interconnected, lines of thoughts which have been excavated without too much trouble from the remarks of the

Tractatus. It may be that the excavation has been such that, as Tractarian elements, some or all of what has been extracted has been damaged or distorted in the process. Nevertheless we seem to have in our hands a number of different lines of thought among which there is remarkable coherence and which all provide arguments which lead us to a conclusion of the non-representability of the self. Furthermore, these arguments clearly reflect deep and abiding problems we face in accounting for identification of the self by the self. In fact, together they seem to me to constitute the heart of the problem self-identification. Together with the assumption that if the self is in the world it is at least in principle representable, these arguments seem to lead us to the exclusion of the self from the world.

2. Exclusion of the self from without the world

Wittgenstein, by means of the above arguments seeks to show how the subject is excluded from being one of the objects that comprise the world. At the same time he is resolute in his refusal to invent another world in which to house it.¹² It is clear that he would consider useless the attempt to fashion a subjective realm over and above the objective world from which the self has been excluded. Whether or not the subject is claimed as a physical object in an objective realm or, for example, a mental one in a subjective realm, the same problems of identification would emerge. Such a reduplication of worlds would serve only to reduplicate the problem. It is also clear that, for Wittgenstein, the self cannot be a transcendent object 'outside' the world. The subject cannot be 'outside' the world, because nothing can. The world is everything that is the case. So, as is said at 5.61,

5.61 So we cannot say in logic, 'The world has this in it, and this, but not that'.

We can also extract, from certain of Wittgenstein's remarks on logic, a further reason for why the subject cannot be transcendent to the world but must be transcendental or liminal with respect to it.¹³ Only three remarks further on from his discussion of psychological reports, the discussion which ends with the comments on what it takes to perceive a complex, Wittgenstein says:

5.552 The 'experience' that we need in order to understand logic is not that something or other is the state of things, but that something *is*: that, however, is *not* an experience.
Logic is *prior* to every experience – that something *is so*.
It is prior to the question 'How?', not prior to the question 'What?'.

5.5521 And if this were not so, how could we apply logic? We might put it in this way: if there would be a logic, even if there were no world, how then could there be a logic, given that there is a world?

Wittgenstein asks regarding logic, how we could think of logic as being independent of the world, as being transcendent to it. He concludes that were logic to be in this way autonomous or transcendent it could not be that we use logic in understanding the world we do understand. But logic just is that which conditions and applies to our world, that is, to the world. The independence of logic and the world would render them radically isolated, (and as radically isolated they would in fact lose their status as logic and world). These remarks are broadly applicable to the nature of the self. The self has been denied a place in the world. We must also deny it a place without the world. The self cannot be transcendent to or independent of the world; if the self were envisaged as transcendent to the world there could be no such self for *us*, it would be isolated from the world and unable to provide a first person view point needed to make sense of the world. In other words it could not *be* a self and the world could not be a world to a self independent of it. It is these thoughts which lead me to add (8) in the argument at the top of this piece. The thought captured in (8) shows the

futility of an attempt – for example, by someone construing ‘world’ as merely empirical world – to place the self outside the world by denial of (7).

3. The self as limit of the world.

The subject can neither be within the world nor without the world and yet it seems to be demanded by the possibility of representation. The obscure and infamous conclusion is that it is variously the limit of the world and the world itself.

Wittgenstein does not provide much in the way of elucidating his solution. Indeed, as I have intimated, it can seem entirely wrong to conceive of it *as* a solution – it is rather as if given the negative moves there is just nothing else to say. The fact that that which can be said turns out to be obscure and mystifying, at worst absurd, merely adds to our sense of the problem. There is of course nothing in these remarks that Wittgenstein himself would not agree with. However, even supposing that in Wittgenstein’s solipsism we have a genuine solution to the problem of identification, I am not here going to attempt to flesh it out. I will rather confine myself to identifying one element that is to be found in the idea of the self as liminal. A clue to understanding this element lies in the above quoted remarks on logic. His comments on the nature of our ‘experience’ of logic can again be fruitfully applied to the self. We have seen that Wittgenstein is concerned to argue that we do not come to know the subject as part of any experience that something or other is the state of things. In particular we are not able to represent the subject by experiencing some part of the world to be thus and so, for as we have seen, we do not seem to be able to locate the subject in the world as one object among others, or experience the subject as we experience objects and states of affairs which are proper parts of the world, and nor is it inferred from things being thus and so. Rather the experience that we need to

understand the self is that something is, that the world is there for us. But that, Wittgenstein adds, is not an experience. It is certainly not an experience of the self and nor is it in any straightforward sense an experience of the world. We experience sectors of the world as being somehow, as being arranged in this way rather than that, so some sort of abstraction is required in order for us to experience that something is. Again the analogy with the visual field is useful. You do not experience the eye in the visual field and nothing in the visual field allows you to infer it is seen by an eye. Rather the experience that you need to experience or 'see' the eye is to 'see' that something is visually there for you – but that is not really to see anything. You do not see that there is a visual field – it is prior to every sighting.

For Wittgenstein, to experience something is to take some part of the world as being configured thus and so. And it being so configured is contingent. Thus the subject cannot be experienced as part of the world. In this remark on logic Wittgenstein suggests that there may nevertheless be a kind of apprehension, an apprehension not properly thought of as an experience, that the world *is*. That, however, is the same as the apprehension that the world *is* for me and thus suggests a way of apprehending the self by apprehending the world.

I have now completed my account of what I see in Wittgenstein's remarks on the self. I take the remarks to be compelling, extremely rich in the layers of argument they produce, and to delineate for us a deep philosophical problem. Let me now say a little bit about why they seem to me to rest on deeply mistaken foundations. In brief, it seems to me that Wittgenstein's problem of identification flows from a model of representation and identification which is too narrow. The solipsistic claims which follow from the supposition of that model therefore seem to me to be avoidable. To do justice to Wittgenstein the claim of avoidability should come only after a detailed

unpicking of much of the argumentation of the *Tractatus*. Without such work we cannot be sure that the model of representation which appears as a problematic presupposition of Wittgenstein's position on the self is not implied by unavoidable commitments that are more fundamental. I am not however going to do that work here. I will therefore attempt only to bring out the peculiarities of the model being used, and show the way in which it is related to Wittgenstein's position on the self, leaving aside the question of whether it is ultimately unavoidable.

IV. Representation without Observation and the Possibility of A Priori Contents

It is obvious to any reader of the *Tractatus* that Wittgenstein thinks that there is an analogy between perception and representation. I have no doubt that it is in many cases an illuminating analogy. However, it can also be a dangerous analogy. It is inevitable that much will be excluded from our world if we think that everything in our world is known to us on the model of observation. When we look back on the four arguments presented above we find, I think, that all the arguments more or less explicitly assume that an observational model gives us an understanding of the basis of representation.

I take it that the role of this assumption in the argument from observability is transparent. The fact that it plays a role in what I called the argument from externality is also fairly clear. Indeed, it was suggested that we see the argument from externality as an argument from analogy, at least in so far as it is an independent argument and not the drawing together of conclusions from other arguments. The conclusion that the source or point of view of understanding of a representational system cannot be represented in that system follows very quickly if you argue with an observational model in mind. Otherwise it is by no means obvious. And if the argument is not an

analogical one based on the model of observation it is quite hard to see what argument it is.

Now what of the argument from psychological ascriptions? The move in that argument which seemed to decisively exclude the self from the world was the move that claimed that a self in the world, since it would have to be complex in order to represent the world, could not represent itself. As such it could not be the unified first person view point required for understanding or representation at all. It was suggested that Wittgenstein's reasons for thinking that a complex self could not represent itself are brought out by attending to the model of representation he presents us with in 5.5423 where he talks about what is required in order to perceive a complex. If representing a complex requires that we have some acquaintance with its simple constituents which we then take to be related to one another in such and such a way – in the way in which perceiving a complex requires that we perceive that its constituents are related to one another in such and such a way – self representation by a complex self looks impossible. So again a perceptual model seems to be an intrinsic part of the argument.

The argument from contingency is in many ways the strongest of the arguments that I have found in Wittgenstein at least in so far as it appears to rest only on an assumption of the contingency of the deliverances of experience. In fact, however, the rationale behind the connection between contingency and the denial of a prioricity seems to rest on the thought that everything known to us via experience has to be known in the way we know things through perception or observation. Perception is constituted in part by there being a contingent connection between perceiver and the object perceived. If we have a genuine case of perception it is always possible that the object which is perceived need not have been perceived. Thus if *what* we perceive

is contingent then, given that our connection to what we perceive is also contingent, we can conclude that everything we perceive could be perceived as being other than it is.¹⁴ Wittgenstein, I suggest, generalizes this argument to everything that can be known through experience. This generalization seems to be illegitimate. The first thought is that it simply does not seem right to say that there could not be a priori parts of our experience that were also contingent.

Perhaps the clearest way to bring this out is to note that we need to distinguish the modal status of the content delivered by an experience from the possibility of grasping that content as true or false. If we make this distinction we can come to see how, despite its contingency, the conditions under which a subject grasps content can be such that it is possible for the subject to grasp such a content only if it is true. This means that we can allow contents which if grasped seem to be known a priori to be true even though they are contingent. For example, I need not take my existence to be necessary in order to accept it as in a sense a priori true that 'I exist' whenever I think it.¹⁵ Similarly my inability to utter falsely 'Now I am speaking' in no way undermines my freedom to utter nothing at all at this time. More generally, when I anticipate experiencing the world, that I will be around doing the experiencing is assumed a priori. It does not follow from this that any part of my experience is not contingent. We would be tempted to overlook the possibility of aspects of what we experience being in this way a priori but contingent, if we assumed not only that what is experienced is contingent, but also that the connection between the *content of the experience* and its *being experienced* must always be contingent. If however part of the content of an experience can depend upon the fact of its being experienced, then that cannot be a warranted assumption. Now we have supposed that the objects that we perceive – see, hear, smell etc. – *are* always contingently connected with the

perceiving subject. If we were to assume that the only way for a subject to know itself through experience would be for it to perceive itself, then we would be entitled to conclude that knowledge of the subject through experience would contradict the contingency of what is experienced. The suggestion is that this line of thought that is present in the argument from contingency.¹⁶ It is on these grounds that I claim that that argument for the non-representability of the self also relies on a perceptual model of representation.¹⁷

I hope the above has established at least that a perceptual model of representation is playing a significant role in all the arguments against the possibility of self-representation. In so far as Wittgenstein is essentially operating with a restriction that is avoidable, we can see solipsism as avoidable. The restriction is, I think, mistaken but I am not going to argue for that view here. Of course, to many ears, the argument that the restriction results in solipsistic claims, would count in itself as an argument by *reductio* against the restriction. I will rest with suggestion that there is a dependency.

V. Concluding Remarks

I want, before finishing, to highlight two remarks that have already been quoted which it seems to me can be taken as suggestions as to how the subject might come to know and represent itself as an object in the world. They indicate lines of thought that Wittgenstein himself is precluded, by his restrictive model of representation, from taking as anything more than illuminations of his view of the subject as liminal. We have already looked at the first of the two remarks I have in mind. It is that remark on the experience of logic that occurs in the sections following the discussion of psychological reports:

5.552 The ‘experience’ that we need in order to understand logic is not that something or other is the state of things, but that something *is*: that, however, is *not* an experience.
Logic is *prior* to every experience – that something *is so*.

As we suggested above, the naive thought here is: why is the ‘experience’ that something ‘*is*’, not also an experience. Not indeed an experience that such and such is the case, but an experience or aspect of experience nevertheless. If we can exploit this aspect of experience in order to extract the possibility of self-representation from the fact of experience itself we might find a way to avoid the solipsistic conclusion.

The second suggestive remark Wittgenstein makes comes in his account of what I can describe in the world:

5.631 ...If I wrote a book called *The World as I found it*, I should have to include a report on my body, and should have to say which parts were subordinate to my will, and which were not, etc.

In describing the world as I found it I would be able to include that which obeys my will and include the fact that it obeys my will. But how do I know which ‘parts are subordinate to my will’ and which are not? In this remark we have presented the possibility that we experience parts of the world in a very particular way – namely we experience them as direct respondents to our will. But if that is so we might have a way of placing ourselves back in the world. For one thing, if we do experience parts of the world as responding to our wills, it is clear that experience is not just of the facts, does not just deliver to us that things are thus and so. In experiencing my arm moving when it moves as a result of my will I experience my arm as mine – I experience it as *my* arm moving. When however I experience my arm moving when it just moves it seems I need not experience it as mine.¹⁸

Let me finish by presenting some remarks from Merleau-Ponty by way of trying to express a warning about how easy it is to fall into making the move that results from Wittgenstein’s exclusion of the subject from the world. Merleau-Ponty

might be thought to provide for us a perfect antidote to Wittgensteinian solipsism. Indeed we could see him as the philosopher who inspires the suggestion made above that we look to bodily action as a way of finding our way back into the world. For Merleau-Ponty, in contrast to the early Wittgenstein, presents us with a thoroughly situated self. Yet it is interesting to note that Merleau-Ponty seems to be drawn to a view regarding the body very similar to that we have ascribed to Wittgenstein regarding the self.

I am accessible to factual situations only if my nature is such that there are factual situations for me. In other words, I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, examine them, walk around them, but my body itself is a thing which I do not observe: in order to be able to do so, I should need the use of a second body which itself would be unobservable. (1962, p. 91).

Here we have the unobservability of the body noted, and explained by its being a precondition of observation. Further he says:

In so far as it sees or touches the world, my body can therefore be neither seen nor touched. What prevents its ever being an object, ever being 'completely constituted' is that it is that by which there are objects. (1962, p. 92).

The body therefore is not one more among external objects, with the peculiarity of always being there. (1962, p. 92).

Thus the permanence of one's own body, if only classical psychology had analysed it, might have led it to the body no longer conceived as an object of the world, but as our means of communication with it. (1962, p. 92).

In these comments we find expressed the temptation to deny the body its worldly status given that it is the means by which we come to observe a world at all. But it would be an error to give in to the temptation – to think of the body as in some way transcendental or as non-representable. And perhaps it is also clearer why we must rather explore whether we do not represent and know our bodies through an experience of them which is unlike our experience of other objects. Perhaps, for example, we can make something of the thought that we experience our bodies

through experiencing the world – through handling things, examining them and walking around them. I suggest that in the same way we also resist the similar temptation with regard to the representing subject.

Merleau-Ponty somewhat mysteriously pronounces in the same chapter: ‘If I did not take my clothes off I would never see the inside of them.’(1962, p. 91).

Fortunately, given that it would seem to be a mistake to think that we must always see to know, even the least frequent bather is not thereby destined not to know that their clothes have an inside.¹⁹

Lucy F. O’Brien

University College London

¹ See David Pears (1987) and (1996).

² The quoted remarks from the *Tractatus*, in the following argument, are those which seem to me to express or explain the claim in italics under which they appear.

³ There is obviously a question as to what, or whether, there is a difference between the claim that the subject is the limit of the world and the claim that it is identical with the world. This is, however, not a question I will go into here.

⁴ Brewer (1992) suggests that the non-encounterability of the self (one of the arguments discussed below), plus a sense-based idealism, is what results in Wittgensteinian solipsism. I am unhappy with this partly because it ignores other arguments for the non-representability of the self, but also because it seems to assume that the assumption of the representability of reality is based on sense-based idealism, but as I suggest, it need not be.

⁵ This feature of certain kinds of ‘ultra realism’ is brought out in Sacks (1994). The paper argues that McGinn’s arguments for his view that we could not ever come to understand the relation between mind and body are of a kind which commit him to necessities that are in tension with his naturalism.

⁶ For an early, and very clear, statement of this example see James (1983, p.162). James refers, when giving the example, to a related one from Brentano.

⁷ This is of course to take Wittgenstein as being very Kantian. I am happy with this – his commitment to there being a subject of experience that stands as the focal point of all representation and understanding is very likely inherited, directly or indirectly, from Kant.

⁸ The discussion here picks up on only one element of what is wrong with this drawing of the visual field. As Sullivan (1996) brings out, what is really wrong with this drawing is that it is a drawing at all.

⁹ We can imagine a similar argument for the claim that space and time are not known through experience. If a space time structure is taken to be a condition of everything

that can be experienced, then it might be claimed to have an a priori status in relation to what is experienced that contradicts the possibility of its being known through experience. Any such a priori status will certainly contradict the possibility of its being known through experience, if we hold that everything we experience could be experienced as otherwise.

¹⁰ Notice that the account given of the import of 5.634 makes it apply equally to the different accounts of self-identification suggested by Russell – to the suggestion both that the self is known and identified through acquaintance and that it is known via description. In this I disagree with Pears (1987, pp. 182-4) who takes this remark as providing a critique just of the description theory. It seems to me rather to connect directly with why the self cannot be identified or noted as part of the world taking the possibility of descriptive identification as a special case. The other special case being identification through acquaintance or some such.

¹¹ As will emerge, it seems to me that the thinking behind the argument from externality understood as an argument from analogy in this way plays a role also in the other three arguments identified.

¹² The thought that it is an important aspect of Wittgenstein's discussion that he sees the futility of postulating a subjective world or realm in order to explain the place of subjectivity is brought out particularly clearly in Bell (1996).

¹³ We obviously have good reasons for being optimistic about gaining elucidation of Wittgenstein's conclusions on the self from his remarks on logic. Both are considered to be systematically elusive with respect to expression and representation, an elusiveness arising from a shared presuppositional status in relation to the world itself. Both are taken to pervade the world by constituting its limits.

¹⁴ Note that if anything that can be known by inference is inferred from what is known through experience, and if what is known through perceptual experience is contingently related to the subject then that known through inference will also be.

¹⁵ Kaplan (1989) notes this feature of indexical utterances and urges a distinction between a context of use and a circumstance of evaluation. Although he is talking only about utterances the idea that we need to distinguish between conditions under which a content is true or false from the conditions under which it can be grasped as true or false is the same. Also see the discussion of the *cogito* in Williams (1978, p.74).

¹⁶ Sullivan (1996) gives a reading of Wittgenstein's discussion of solipsism that takes it to be based at least in part on a concern to avoid (Kantian) idealism. A rejection by Wittgenstein of a substantial a priori is argued to be a central element of that concern. If that is right, and the reading is fascinating and plausible, the rejection of a substantial a priori by Wittgenstein has deeper roots than has been brought out here.

¹⁷ It is perhaps evidence in favour of looking at Wittgenstein in this way that Anscombe, and other Wittgensteinians, seem to hold that we do not identify or refer to ourselves using 'I' precisely because they can give no account of the way in which we are presented with ourselves that would explain such reference. I think their mistake is to adopt an observational model of identification – such a model seems bound to fail us in regard to the first person.

¹⁸ See O'Brien (1995).

¹⁹ This paper was written for a conference on Solipsism held in Rethymnon, Crete funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation and organized by David Bell, Maria Vanieri and Willi Vossenkuhl. My thanks to them and to other participants, for comments and for the considerable amount I learnt from their papers. Thanks also to an anonymous

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