SOLIPSISM: A REDEFINITION

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To the Memory of my Parents

MARK AND GERTRUDE SCHWARTZ

for whose generosity and kindness
this work is inadequate recompense

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# CONTENTS

DEDICATION ........................................................................................................... 2  
CONTENTS ............................................................................................................. 3  

## Part 1: THE ORIGINAL CONCEPT AND ITS BASIS

INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................ 5  
THE SENSES ............................................................................................................ 7  
  The Underlying Premise for Solipsism ............................................................... 7  
  The Fallibility of Our Senses ............................................................................. 7  
  Knowledge Correspondence ............................................................................. 8  
  Sense Amplification ......................................................................................... 9  
  Majority Vote ................................................................................................... 10  
  Metaphysical Correspondence ........................................................................ 10  
  The Logic of Solipsism .................................................................................... 11  
REASON ............................................................................................................... 12  
  A Rational Over-riding of the Senses? .............................................................. 12  
  An Ordering of the Sensory Impressions ....................................................... 12  
  The Relationship of Reason and the Senses .................................................. 13  
INNATE IDEAS .................................................................................................... 14  
INTUITION ........................................................................................................... 15  
THE PRESUMED NATURE OF THE WORLD .................................................... 15  
  An Orderly World ............................................................................................ 15  
  A Disorderly World ........................................................................................ 16  
  A Parapsychological or Spiritual World ...................................................... 16  
  A Prospective Inside View of the World ....................................................... 17  

## Part 2: THE REDEFINITION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

THE REDEFINITION ................................................................................................ 18  
  From “Self” to “Individual Human Mind” ....................................................... 18  
  From “Modifications” to (1) “At Any Particular Moment” .......................... 19  
  From “Modifications” to (2) “Truth or Reality” .......................................... 20  

("Contents" continued next page)
Part 1: THE ORIGINAL CONCEPT AND ITS BASIS

INTRODUCTION

The 1979 Merriam Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary defines “solipsism” as “a theory holding that the self can know nothing but its own modifications and that the self is the only existent thing”.

Traditionally, philosophers have regarded the concept of solipsism as a problem. They have conceded that solipsism is irrefutable; however, they say it is unbelievable, absurd, and cannot be proven. Philosophers describe solipsism as an extreme form of “subjective idealism”.

Now, what is the problem with solipsism? It is a notion in which you are given a vision of being totally isolated from every other person and thing; of being adrift in the void with – at best – an illusory reflection of reality; or, worse yet, there being no reality, no other people, nothing; of being hopelessly, incurably alone in a world of your own invention. It is a notion that seems to deny any correspondence between what it is that you perceive, on the one hand, and what it is that is being perceived, on the other.

Furthermore, there appears to be, as a result of your isolation, the abolition of all common standards – of morality, of measurement, of values, of everything. God does not prevail, nor does science, nor does common sense, for you merely dream up, along with your own world, your own standards.

Why were the seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophers who dealt with the issues implicit in solipsism unable to dispel this sort of imagery? They all (except David Hume, 1711 – 1776) approached what they perceived to be a philosophical abyss and drew back, unable to accept what their own reasoning revealed to them. Their recourse was to invoke faith in God as an antidote to this frightful concept.
Hume was unable to justify recourse even to the consolation of religious faith. He simply decided to ignore the implications of solipsism – as he perceived them – in the conduct of his own life. This seems to have been, for the most part, how other philosophers have dealt with those implications ever since.

The philosophers’ difficulty, I believe, was that they lacked what I’ll call an “inside” understanding. They were tied intellectually and emotionally to the contexts of theology on one hand and the scientific method on the other, which seemed to preclude there being any meaningful way of comprehending the paradoxical idea of solipsism.

I intend to provide you with an “inside” understanding of that notion. The procedure for doing so, however, will involve only the kind of objective reasoning with which you are familiar and will not require that you abandon either religion or science.

Having an inside understanding of solipsism relates to the question of perspective. As an example of what I mean by “perspective”, let’s consider the meaning of your vote in a democratic national election. In one sense, your vote does not really make a difference: Even a close election is usually counted in thousands of votes. Because of that fact, you might feel indifferent toward voting.

However, if you do vote there is no other vote in the nation, including the votes of the nation’s leaders, that counts one bit more than your own. From this viewpoint you might regard voting as a matter of personal pride and satisfaction.

Both points of view in the example above are “realistic”. They refer to the same event, but they reveal different perspectives: The first (“My vote doesn’t count.”) is an “outside” view; the second (“My vote counts as much as the nation’s leaders.”) is an “inside” view. The idea of voting is meaningful to the latter.

If we take the theory of solipsism and look at it from a new perspective, an inside view, we can effectively do away with the fearful imagery this “irrefutable” theory evokes and, perhaps, get a basic sense of who we individually are. We can also discover a way of verifying our own personal philosophies, if we wish to do so
THE SENSES

The Underlying Premise for Solipsism

The term “solipsism” is derived from the Latin words “solus”, meaning “alone”, and “ipse”, meaning “self” – the self alone. As we saw in the Introduction, it is “a theory holding that the self can know nothing but its own modifications and that the self is the only existent thing”.

What is the basis or premise for this theory? The premise is that each of us acquires our conscious knowledge exclusively through the medium of our own individual senses, the impressions of which (our “own modifications”) are reported to our awareness.

That premise seems straightforward enough, but why does it lead to the implication spelled out by this definition? Why, specifically, is the self supposed to be the only existent thing? We need to look at the reasoning leading up to that implication. (It will not and should not convince you, but it may appear to be “logical”.)

The Fallibility of Our Senses

We can easily see that acquiring knowledge through our own senses can be a problem: Our senses are notorious for their ability to deceive us in terms of what we believe to be an accurate perception of external reality. We can define “accurate perception” as correct or objective “seeing” or knowledge – knowledge that corresponds to a verifiable external reality.

Before we get into a discussion of this issue of knowledge “correspondence” to external reality, let’s look at a few familiar examples of the recognizably faulty operation of our senses. Our visual sense tells us that a straw bends when put into a glass of water. We need knowledge, which is also derived from sense impressions (in this case, from the sense of touch) to change that perception. And an event that we “see” may turn out to be an illusion (as in a magic show) or a hallucination (as a result of illness or drugs) or the content of a dream.
You could be “color blind”: When you see the color red perhaps you “actually” see green. (This is discovered by having you report on what you see in a specially prepared picture: You will see an image formed by the green elements, which is different from an image formed by the red elements in the picture.)

Besides vision, our other senses can be fooled as well: We have artificial flavoring in commercially prepared food and drinks; human imitations of bird calls; imitation scents duplicating those of flowers; synthetic fabric made to look and feel like fur. We could extend the list of such deceptions of our senses almost without end. However, we can almost always correct them to normal perception with time and new sensory data.

**Knowledge Correspondence**

This leads us back to the issue of knowledge that supposedly corresponds to a verifiable external reality – objective knowledge. But when we correct our fallible senses, to what are we correcting them? Specifically, is “normal perception” an accurate representation of external reality?

Before offering a tentative answer to that question, let’s take note of the fact that in some cases we deliberately take advantage of the fallibility of our senses and let the results stand as if they represented external reality. Here are a couple of examples:

What we see as a traditional motion picture is the projection of twenty-four still photographs each second on to a reflective surface. These photographs are alternated with twenty-four equal time presentations of blackness (while one photograph is being replaced by the next). We are unable to visually separate out the twenty-four photographs or to perceive the black frames at all.

Through our “persistence of vision” we see a motion picture. Should we try training our vision (if it were possible) to avoid this fallacy? Most people would probably not want to do so.
Theoretically, from the point of view of modern physics, objects that we perceive as solid are actually particles of atomic energy in constant, extremely rapid motion within mostly empty space. Can we harness our senses to perceive that process directly? Would there be any point, in terms of our normal objectives, to try to do so? We seem instead to prefer our old fashioned notion of what “solid” is supposed to mean.

Returning to our question, then, is normal perception an accurate representation of external reality? The seemingly “logical” answer is this: The facts that

(1) our senses can be fallible in regard to what we think is real and
(2) in some situations, at least, we regard it as desirable to let some of our fallacies stand,

make it impossible for us to rely on our sense impressions as representing any external reality that is independent of our individual sensory apparatus. How can we – knowing their capacity for fallibility and selective perception – trust those senses?

The question then really becomes, is there an external reality for our senses to correspond to? It seems that we have no way of connecting to whatever external reality there may be (if any), locked, as we each are, inside of the mere reports of our own modifications to our individual awareness.

**Sense Amplification**

Surely, you may think, there are ways of finding out through measuring devices such as microscopes, telescopes, computers, and so on, what is really there. All such devices, though, must be designed in terms of our senses, manufactured with the aid of our senses, and made use of by individuals employing their senses. So, there is no method of verification that can be devised, it would seem, that can avoid relying ultimately on those self-same fallible and “selective” senses.
Majority Vote

What about majority vote as to the nature of external reality? That, in effect, is the standard we make use of; that’s what “normal” means. A majority vote about several hundred years ago would surely have affirmed that the earth was flat and that it was the center of the universe. Could there not be the equivalents of such fallacies today? Currently, in fact, our collective knowledge seems to be changing quite rapidly in the light of space exploration and other scientific advances. It seems likely that the views of future generations of majority votes will affirm an external universe quite different from today’s normal perception of it.

Metaphysical Correspondence

In the issues above we have been dealing with common sense and scientific normal perceptions. What about perceptions shared in some measure by multitudes in the area of religion, spirituality, or metaphysics? Can the answers provided from those sources be the genuine representation of the external universe? Can they provide us with a verifiable knowledge of external reality, spiritual in nature and governed by spiritual laws, knowledge that is independent of our physical sensing faculties?

The absolute nature asserted for each of a number of differing metaphysical or religious views would seem to verify that all but one are incorrect perceptions of external reality. Absolute views, by conventional definition, cancel out all other views. And there is no way in conventional objectivity to determine which – if any – is the correct perception.

Less absolutist types of metaphysical or religious views also cannot be verified as to their correspondence to external reality. As in the scientific and common sense areas of consideration, we are dependent on our compromised ability to perceive that metaphysical or religious reality with our individual physical senses.
But suppose that an overwhelming majority of humankind were suddenly to receive the same religious vision of the world or universe. Would not that event verify a correspondence of that vision to the external spiritual reality?

The spiritual majority vote, as in the scientific majority vote, can change radically over time. The Roman Catholic Church, considered by many as a prime example of an absolute faith, one that held sway over the Western world for centuries, has altered many of its views, particularly in recent years. Other Christian churches have evolved with even greater differing views; Islam has differing sects. Judaism displays a spectrum of beliefs about the nature of the universe – from ultra religious mysticism to secular humanism.

There are, of course, an additional vast number of differing Eastern, Western, and “primitive” religious viewpoints as to the nature of external reality. It has to be counted a dubious proposition that all of these views would suddenly and permanently coalesce into one view. Even then, how would you know for certain that this had indeed occurred, dependent as you are on your own individual senses?

The Logic of Solipsism

It should be clear by now that while you may choose to accept some norm of knowledge, more or less scientific, more or less metaphysical, spiritual, or religious in nature, based on either “self-evidence” or “faith”, you cannot know through your own senses or through common sense (whatever your fallible senses tell you that common sense is) whether or not your sensory impressions correspond to any external reality.

This brings us back to our starting point in understanding solipsism and its “logical” implication that only the self exists. It seems that you have no way of knowing that what is being reported to your awareness is other than “modifications” in your sensory apparatus, internally caused. Thus, you have no way of certifying the existence of an external world or even of other people. You are left with your ideas of an external world formed by your senses in a self that, for all you can know is the only existent thing. This is the essence of “solipsism” in the original definition we have started with.
We have arrived at this conclusion – that each of us is inescapably isolated and imprisoned by our individual sensory apparatus – through conventional objective reasoning. But perhaps we haven’t fully explored the possibilities of escaping our dependence on our internal modifications for direct contact with external reality. Let’s now look at what seem to be possibilities for escaping the domination of our senses: (1) reason, (2) innate ideas, and (3) intuition

**REASON**

A Rational Overriding of the Senses?

What about the faculty of reason? Cannot we assert that there is an autonomous ability to reason that can override our senses, which can give us direct access to the external world?

Let’s deal with this question first on a practical level. There is little argument, I believe, that some individuals have more capacity for rational thought than others. Likewise, with equal capacity, one individual may develop (because, say, of greater motivation, opportunity, or education) a greater usage of that capacity than other individuals. There is also general acceptance of the maxim that “Rational men of good will can agree to disagree.” And it is not often denied that the rational nature of an individual can at least occasionally be overcome by his or her emotional nature.

Just on the face of it, then, it would seem that rationality is no more help in discovering the existence or nature of external reality than are our physical and/or metaphysical senses. There is, however, a basis more to the point for us not to consider rationality as the way of discovering any external reality that might exist.

**An Ordering of the Sensory Impressions**

I’ve talked about the senses or sensory apparatus as the medium through which impressions of presumed external reality reach our awareness. Actually, this process cannot take place without the intervention of our reasoning faculty.
While most of our sensory input does not need consciousness to have an effect (dilation of the eye as a result of approaching darkness; increased perspiration as the air grows warmer, for examples), those sensory impressions that require our awareness must be processed through an *ordering* device. We make order out of our sensory impressions through our reasoning capability.

You perceive that Richard is approaching, not James, because you have the ability to distinguish some sensory impressions from other sensory impressions through reasoning from *categories*. The visual categories of these impressions, such as tall, short, blonde, dark haired (and so on to more and more refined categories and likely involving other senses as well) physically define Richard and James for you. Without this function of reasoning, you could not distinguish between them. (I am not implying, of course, that categorization is the sole function of reasoning.)

**The Relationship of Reason and the Senses**

Sense impressions, then, when reporting about an “external world” are dependent on the reasoning capacity (and, in particular, its ordering function) for awareness of that “external world” to take place. However, the reverse side of the coin is that reason is dependent on sense impressions, past or present, as its raw material. Without the availability of sense impressions, past or present, the reasoning capacity would be without employment.

Even in the case of mathematics, the pure science, dependent primarily on the orderly manipulations and juxtaposition of symbols, the symbols must be sensed before reason can deal with them. Without the ability to first sense those symbols – and paper, pens, computers, books, and so forth – the rational ability of the mathematician could not function.

But is not “two plus two equals four” an external reality that is independent of our senses? It is not, because the concept was initially an *abstraction* of that which had been perceived by the senses. For example, two elderly people and two elderly people are always in the process of verging toward less than four.
“Two plus two equals four” is merely one of an almost infinite number of abstract concepts, which are given meaning by analogy to that which is (or has been) sensed by an individual. Therefore, that and all other such concepts depend upon our fallible senses. So, reason cannot be any more reliable than its raw material (sense impressions) in providing us with evidence of an external reality, from the “logical” implication of the dictionary definition of solipsism.

INNATE IDEAS

Is not our knowledge of the world “a priori”? That is, do we not have inborn or innate ideas that provide us with direct experience of that world as it actually exists? The implication of an affirmative answer to these questions would be that we have the ability to perceive the “real” world at birth, independent of sensory experience.

Here is an example from a scientific experiment that seems to support the concept of the innate idea: Separated from their mothers by a thick piece of glass suspended several feet above the ground (but secured in place by resting on a desk on each side) human infants refuse to crawl over it to reach their imploring mothers. A kitten, on the other hand has no hesitation, in the analogous circumstance, in crossing over the glass to the cat which is its mother.

This experiment seems to illustrate the existence of an innate idea: specifically, fear of heights in human infants. However, activation of that fear, in this example, requires that the infant experience what it senses as a chasm between itself and its mother. In this case, the sense of a chasm is “incorrect”, because what otherwise would be a chasm no longer is such, having been bridged by the thick glass.

Innate ideas, then, show themselves in the form of responses to that which is sensed. We are back to our starting point of senses reporting (through an individual sensory apparatus to a separate human awareness) impressions that may be nothing more than modifications in the sensory apparatus itself.

INTUITION
It seems at times when we get an idea or a solution to a problem from “out of the blue” or in a sudden “flash” of insight that it comes to us *independent* of what we believe to be our sensory data or the result of reasoning. In a metaphysical consideration, the idea of “God” might be the result of an intuitive perception.

However, whatever the idea or solution intuited, it is inevitably experienced in the context of the senses. The intuitive knowledge of God cannot appear until the individual experiences his or her world and develops the feeling (whether suddenly or over time) that what is sensed as the world is not intelligible, for that individual, without God.

Like reason and innate ideas, then, intuition is a *response* to that which is sensed. Therefore, like the senses themselves, it cannot guarantee to us that our ideas have any correspondence to external reality. This is the case no matter how clear and compelling our intuitive vision of that external world might be. It is not uncommon, for example, for a young person to intuit – clearly and compellingly – that he or she and another person were “born for each other”, only to discover at a later time that this was not the case.

**THE PRESUMED NATURE OF THE WORLD**

**An Orderly World**

In terms of conventional objective reasoning (from the definition of solipsism with which we started), it seems that we have come to a dead end in our search for a way to verify the existence of a reality external to our individual senses, one that corresponds to our ideas about it. Nonetheless, let’s pursue the idea of an external world.

The reality or world we have been considering up to this point has been a presumably somewhat orderly one, whether physically or metaphysically conceived. It is one that to a great extent can be relied upon; one which exhibits a definite nature; one which, from our ordinary point of view, has a past, present, and future.

There is a conceptual alternative to such an orderly world that we can consider. It is the notion that the external world is not the
rational sort of phenomenon we may like to envision but one that is chaotic, totally capricious, undependable, and unpredictable, one that is independent of physical or spiritual laws.

A Disorderly World

How can this notion of an irrational, disorderly world even be theorized, however? We have a clue from astronomy: Stars, the light of which we see today, may have died and stopped emitting light millions of years ago. It is because of the constant speed of light and the vast distances involved that we see the stars as if their light were being emitted at the present moment.

There is, of course, no break with the idea of an orderly universe or world in this example. However, we are free to wonder, with this example in mind, if perhaps the presumed world (at any moment we may be considering it) does not exist at all in the way we perceive it.

The light of the star is, at one moment, millions of years old, at the next moment only five years old. (We cannot rely on our telescopes, of course, as they are merely amplifications of our fallible senses.) That which appears as a tree one moment is a river at the next and a glass of sherry at the next. A chair becomes a sonnet, which promptly becomes a goat and then an orchestra. The implication is that this sort of thing – or even stranger kinds of happenings – might be characteristic of this disorderly world if we were able to perceive it directly.

A Parapsychological or Spiritual World

While such madness cannot be accommodated in the conventionally objective framework from which we have been operating, let’s look at what seems to be a more conceivable possibility of “disorder” in the world: Scientific studies in parapsychology reveal the existence in the minds of some individuals of pre-cognitive and post-cognitive events, the latter extending back through centuries of asserted previous lives.

At the present time we have no knowledge in conventional science to explain the fact that in a hypnotic state some individuals
are able to experience past events unrelated to and unknown in their present lives (but historically accurate) as though they were happening now. Such events are often described in a language presently unknown to the hypnotized individual. Carefully controlled experiments also demonstrate clairvoyance in statistically significant terms. These phenomena might seem to suggest an irrational element in the world.

Also, many people believe in ghosts and other apparitions; possession by the Devil, requiring exorcism; Divine Intervention; the power of prayer; angels; and other “spiritual” manifestations, which for others do not seem to comport with a rational, orderly world.

A Prospective Inside View of the World

However, from an inside point of view on solipsism that you will be examining, you will discover that whether the world is rational or irrational or partly both, your perception of it is always true or real, that it corresponds to the world exactly as it is, at any moment of your awareness. (This assertion, of course, implicitly entails a definite affirmation of the existence of that external world.) Clearly, if the assertion is valid, then the concept of solipsism is not as “self” limiting as it has appeared to be and, furthermore, promises a solution to the problem of verifying that your knowledge corresponds to an objective external reality.

We have been trying to find a way of objectively knowing external reality as it is. However, in our consideration of objectivity, we have used conventional perspectives (common sense, scientific, and metaphysical), which are not the only perspectives available. I propose to provide another perspective for objectivity by drawing out into the open what is implicit in the definition of solipsism. That redefinition will reveal a new objective way for you to know that your perception of external reality “corresponds to” and connects you to it. That redefinition is: “a theory holding that the individual human mind can know nothing but its own modifications and, therefore, that whatever is present in your awareness at any particular moment is verified as true or real.”

Part 2: THE REDEFINITION
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

THE REDEFINTION

From “Self” to “Individual Human Mind”

I “intuitively” knew that there was something wrong with the original definition with which we began. I felt that if I were to examine each term in that definition that I would discover what the “mistake” was. I’m now going to take you through the process I initiated for myself to accomplish that end.

The definition of solipsism that we started with was: “: a theory holding that the self can know nothing but its own modifications and that the self is the only existent thing.”

I have proposed that what we’ll end up with is: “: a theory holding that the individual human mind can know nothing but its own modifications and, therefore, that whatever is present in your awareness at any particular moment is verified as true or real.”

What is the “self” of the original definition? Is it a physical body or a specific part of that body? Or is it a metaphysical soul or spirit, either independent of or part of a larger spiritual Self? Or is it some combined physical-metaphysical entity? The answer to this question need not concern us here; it makes no difference to understanding “self” in this definition.

What is clear is that the self, whatever its nature, is something that, first of all, knows. That is to say, the self exhibits a mental function. This mental function is the focal point of the first part of the definition. It is not an undefined “self” that we are concerned with but specifically with that aspect of the self that manifests mental function, namely the “mind”. So, to start with we’ll think of our subject more as “mind” than “self”.

The mind can be defined in an almost infinite number of ways. For our purposes it simply refers to an undefined entity that has the
capacity to know. We have merely substituted one undefined entity for another but in the process emphasized the focus of the definition, which is the mental act of knowing.

Some people believe that inanimate objects possess, in a particular sense, consciousness. And it is clear that animals other than humankind have the capacity to know. For examples, dogs recognize or know their masters, and gorillas can be trained to know and to use sign language. However, without prejudice to the idea that various animals or things also possess consciousness, this redefinition will concern itself with the human mind. More specifically, it will be with the separate or individual human mind with its separate sensory apparatus.

The consciousness of the individual human mind, for the purpose of this redefinition will mean simply “immediate awareness as subjectively experienced”. When I speak of the mind “knowing” it will be to this conscious awareness form of knowing that I refer. However, this is not to imply a denial of other forms of the human mind or self “knowing”, such as “subconscious” or “unconscious”.

As a starting point, then, for redefining “solipsism”, we have for the first part, “The individual human mind, through its function of immediate subjective awareness, can know nothing but its own modifications.” (We’ll take up the second part of the definition – that the self is the only existent thing – after fully examining the first part.) Let’s look next at the term, “modifications”

From “Modifications” to (1) “At Any Particular Moment”

Without specifying the content of any modifications, one thing we can say immediately about them is that they have to represent a sequence of events: First, the mind, through its function of immediate awareness, knows one modification, then another, subsequently others. A sequence of such changes or additions to knowledge must, of necessity, take place over a period of time.

To include this concept of time in the redefinition, we can use the notion of “at any particular moment”. Frequently, you can hear an expression like, “One moment he was here, the next he was gone.”
Or, “At that moment the phone rang.” This is a unitary sense of a moment, by which I mean that one moment contains one experience of awareness.

However, you can also hear expressions like, “At that moment a thousand things went through my mind.” Or, in the opposite direction, “My life is but a single moment in eternity.” In either of these cases – or in any other where the term “moment” is used in a non-unitary sense – a sequence of events during that moment can usually be determined.

That is to say, within any particular moment a single thought, impression, or other experience in awareness can be identified as occurring first, second, or third; earlier or later. Even if the thoughts occur “simultaneously”, that group of thoughts can be contrasted in a time sequence with earlier and later thoughts or group of thoughts.

The point is that “any particular moment” is not restricted to an explicit “instant” or to any other arbitrary time period. The duration and content and internal sequences are always subjectively defined. So, we shall make the notion of time, which is implicit in “modifications”, explicit in the redefinition: “The individual human mind, through its function of immediate awareness, can know nothing but its own modifications at any particular moment.”

From “Modifications” to (2) “Truth or Reality”

Having identified the temporal aspect of modifications, what else can we say about them? What is it that the individual human mind knows when it is aware of its own modifications? What it knows is the content of truth or reality at that particular moment.

How can this be the case? It’s because of the intrinsic nature of the mental process of perceiving, knowing, or believing: Everything that comes into your awareness comes into it as an affirmation at the moment it comes into your awareness. It makes no difference whether what you perceive is “real” or “imagined”.

For instance, if you experience what you may have heretofore regarded as a negation or doubtful belief such as, “I don’t believe that there is a Santa Claus” or, “I doubt that there is a Santa Claus”, each
negation or doubt is actually the object of your **affirmative** knowledge or belief. The statements can be accurately expressed as, “I know (it is true that) there is no Santa Claus” or, “I believe (the reality is that) the existence of Santa Claus is doubtful”. The doubt is *added* on and attached to whatever imagery you have about “Santa Claus”.

Knowledge or belief can never occur in experience – at the moment of that experience – other than to affirm the positive meaning, the truth or factuality of whatever has entered your awareness, even if the truth is about a negation or doubt. If you believe or doubt that it *isn’t* going to rain, for example, the process of awareness *affirms* for you at that moment that it’s not going to rain.

Furthermore, that moment’s truth or reality or fact can never be annulled by the truth of a subsequent moment: If I see John in the distance walking toward me, *that* is the truth of that moment. If, when the figure comes closer, it becomes clear to me that it is not John, the fact that I was “wrong” a moment before is the truth of *this* subsequent moment and is not retroactive.

Why doesn’t the truth of this later moment cancel out the truth or factuality about the previous one? It is because at any particular moment the sensory impressions that reach our awareness are all that we can have; they represent all the knowledge available to us, totality. There is nothing to compare them with at that moment.

That knowledge is inextricably connected to that particular moment and must be true or real to us, because our perceiving process affirms whatever comes into our awareness. Nothing subsequently can retroactively alter the relationship of that moment to its content – the truth or reality affirmed. Each truth or reality is *absolute* in its moment of awareness for you. (“Absolute” here is used in the sense of “complete”, “whole”, “definite”, “unconditional”, and “unrelated to anything else”.)

*The flow of your awareness is a succession of absolute truths or realities of the moment.*

You are always *connected* to truth or reality at every moment of your awareness, whatever the content of that truth or reality might be
for you at that moment. Everyone else is connected to truth and reality in this same manner.

We can now further revise the definition of solipsism to read: “The individual human mind, through its function of immediate awareness, can know nothing but its own truth or reality at any particular moment.”

However, this can be more formally and completely be expressed as, “a theory holding that the individual human mind can know nothing but its own modifications and, therefore, that whatever is present in your awareness at any particular moment is verified as true or real.” (I’ll discuss “verified” shortly.)

IMPPLICATIONS OF THE DEFINITION

The Underlying Premises

Two underlying premises for the redefinition are:

1) We each acquire our awareness at any particular moment through “modifications” – the content of our individual sensory experiences – as they impact our individual minds. (This, of course, is an underlying premise for the original definition of solipsism as well.)

2) The content of our awareness is invariably affirmed as true or real for us at the particular moment it comes into awareness, and each truth or reality is locked into that moment of awareness. Any subsequent “correction” becomes the truth or reality of that later moment and is not retroactive.

It’s important to point out that the redefinition we are working on is a perspective on the connection between yourself and truth and reality not about any actual content of truth or reality – “content” being whatever is present in your awareness at some particular moment.

So, this perspective does not foreclose the content of any other perspectives on truth, reality, and self. It does not even specify any
intrinsic truth or reality to its own content. It is, itself, the “content” of truth only while it is present in the awareness of some individual at some particular moment. (While having no content itself, it is “contained” in awareness like an empty jar being contained in a suitcase.)

“Truth”, in this redefinition, is inclusive of any or all of those viewpoints that are put forward as universal or divine or profound truths, as well as all scientific and common sense ideas and all of the most mundane occurrences available to our awareness. Nothing, in other words, is excluded from the status of being true or real so long as it meets the qualification – from this perspective – of being the content of an individual mind at a particular moment.

Also, this truth’s opposite is not “error” or “falsehood” or “heresy” but is simply the absence of truth. The absence of truth, in effect, is the absence of immediate awareness. Immediate awareness includes all that we experience, including, in addition to waking consciousness, dreams, hallucinations, imagination and so on. Only dreamless sleep is excluded. And each of those moments of immediate awareness constitutes absolute truth or absolute reality.

The Second Part of the Original Definition Superfluous

Now, let’s turn our attention to the second part of the original definition: “– and the self is the only existent thing.” This, you will recall, refers to the idea that being subject to the limitation of our individual sensory apparatus we seemingly have no logical or reasonable way of concluding that other people or minds or anything else exists outside of our own mind or self.

By the time I finished exploring the first part of the original definition I realized that the first part itself makes the second part superfluous. If “the self can know nothing but its own modifications”, then only the self – you or I – can know whether or not we are the “only existent thing”, and I am quite certain that most of us, at least most of the time, do not “know” that we are, each of us, the only existent thing.

We generally know that we had biological parents, for instance, and we would have great difficulty not knowing that. They, at least,
would have had, “existence” at some point in time. And the fact that our use of language is not primarily a private but is a social instrument is an additional argument against each of us being the only existent thing.

While most people would reject the traditional meaning of solipsism as being valid they might still think of it as being a “logical” truth. This might be a reasonable outside view of the implication of solipsism. However, from an inside view it is not logical, because, as discussed above, it ignores an inherent contradiction between the first part and the second part of the original definition.

A New Perspective on Objectivity

Let’s focus on the implication of the redefinition for the question of “objectivity”. Objective knowledge, as traditionally understood, is what we have when that knowledge corresponds to an external reality and does so verifiably. Solipsism, as traditionally understood, appears to have no relevance to objective knowledge, because it seems to deny the existence of any external world (“ – the self is the only existent thing.”)

What would be the way out of this dilemma – a desire for objective knowledge, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, an “irrefutable” theory that seems to preclude any way of achieving objective knowledge? As previously advertised, the way out of this dilemma is a new perspective – an inside view as distinguished from an outside view. And that perspective requires a new context.

A New Context for the New Perspective

We have arrived at a non-traditional understanding of solipsism in the context of conventional objective reasoning. However, it is now necessary to make explicit that solipsism has its own context, namely, individual subjectivity. Science and religion each have their own context as well. Science has its context in the scientific method, and religion has its context in theology. Those contexts are referent points for the purpose of objective verification in science or religion.

Let’s look at a familiar example of the importance of these contexts: Galileo determined by controlled observation (scientific
method) that the earth circled the sun. However, the Church condemned him for promulgating heresy. Religious scholars had verified through study of the Bible (theology) that the sun circled the earth. Therefore, Galileo’s assertion had to be untrue in one theological context – at least until fairly recently – regardless of the fact that it was verifiably true in the context of the scientific method.

Verification, from the context of solipsism, does not necessarily involve either of the contexts of theology or the scientific method. It involves directly the context of your own subjective awareness – your own experience in awareness at any particular moment.

This is probably neither a clear nor a comfortable context for you at first acquaintance. You are used to the idea of looking for objective verification (for judgments you make about what is true or not true) from some external authority. However, that is not changed, as it might seem to you at this point.

The fact that you look to science, religion, common sense, or any other kind of external authority for verification is not intended to be abrogated by an inside view of solipsism. What is intended is an additional perspective, which is this: Any external authority gets to be an authority by being accepted as such by you. To put it another way, your own awareness is the ultimate verifier for any external verifier. No external verifier has any standing – it cannot be a source for determining objective truth – if it does not make sense to you as being suitable for that purpose.

An Inside Perspective on Solipsism and Verification

However, from the perspective of this redefinition, the activity of objective verification is not limited to just the use of the external verifiers that you have specified as suitable for the purpose. We have to acknowledge your internal – inborn or learned, subconscious or unconscious – verifiers as well. To be clear, every experience in “immediate awareness” at each and every moment of your awareness is a verified truth or reality.

To compare this new perspective (that all verification is, in effect, automatic) with conventional verification, let’s use as an example, an experience that one might have in a museum of art if
someone is not particularly well acquainted with the subject of painting. Here is a sequence of ideas that might enter that individual’s awareness:

“I think this must be a painting by Manet”
“Come to think of it, I’m not really that sure.”
“I’d better check it out in this reference book.”
“Aha, I was wrong; it’s a Cézanne.”

In a conventional (outside) sense of objective verification, we might say that the last statement was the moment when that verification occurred, provided we accept that the reference book is authoritative. From an inside perspective on solipsism, however, each of those four ideas expressed above is self-verified at the moment it enters awareness:

When the individual thought he or she was viewing a Manet painting, it was a Manet painting. There was nothing else at that moment in awareness with which to compare it. Similarly, when doubt occurred, doubt was the only reality. The decision to look at a reference book was an expression of belief that verification was to be found in its pages. That belief was, at that moment, the only reality. Each of these ideas, then, was verified to the same level of truth or reality as the final idea, from an inside perspective on solipsism.

That content – each of the four ideas in the example above – is absolute; it constitutes totality. Whatever one is aware of cannot be “not true” at that particular moment of awareness. The human mind does not allow its awareness to be not true at that moment of awareness. (It does, of course, allow for subsequent “correction”.)

The point of the example above – and of this redefinition of solipsism – is, again, that you are always connected to objectively verified truth or reality at every particular moment of awareness, as is everyone else. From the point of view of common sense, religion, or science, your awareness may contain an untruth or not reflect “reality”, but you are nonetheless connected to a world that you know.

The Affirmation of External Reality
There is never anything else but the content of your own awareness at any particular moment; that content is invariably verified as true or real at that moment; and that awareness constitutes everything that exists – totality – at that moment. So, whatever you perceive as being the external world is exactly “like” the external world, because it is the external world.

In arriving at this inside viewpoint on solipsism regarding external reality, we have surpassed our original intention of meeting the criterion for objectivity: We were attempting to find a way of proving that the external world “corresponded” to our perception of it, or that it was an accurate “reflection” of it. But the line of reasoning above leads to the conclusion that our perception at any particular moment is identical with external reality. Our idea of external reality and its reality are the same thing.

What I have just described seems to parallel “common sense”, as in, “Seeing is believing”. However, it should be noted that although solipsism, as redefined, affirms “reality”, just as does common sense, it differs from common sense in that it affirms the centrality of the individual mind’s awareness of that reality at any particular moment.

The Objectivity of Abstract Concepts

It is not difficult for most people, I think, to identify a tree as an object external to themselves, so one can speak objectively about a tree. But what about concepts generally thought of as being abstract, like beautiful or fragrant, and love or friendship, for examples? These concepts certainly would appear (to what I’ve described as “an outside view of solipsism”) to be non-objects. So, what kind of objectivity can such notions have from an “inside” perspective?

The content of our awareness – the truth or reality of the moment – is always the object of our belief or knowledge. For example, the expression, “It’s a beautiful day.” translates out, in the redefinition, to, “I know (it is true that) the day is beautiful.” In this example, “It’s a beautiful day” is the object of our knowledge, thus objective – not just grammatically but also, specifically, as an experience. There is no truth or reality without it being experienced in
awareness at a particular moment; from an inside view of solipsism, it cannot be other than the truth or reality at that moment.

From an inside point of view, then, there is no difference as to meaning, when experienced in awareness, of “There’s a tree.”, “It’s a beautiful day.”, “God rules the Universe.”, “They’re in love.”, or “This experiment is not scientific”. All these expressions of belief constitute knowledge that is experienced as “corresponding to” (actually being) the external world at that moment. (Please remember: We are looking at one specific perspective on objectivity, and it is not intended to cancel out any other perspective on objectivity.)

A Demonstration of the New Perspective

Let’s say that a hypothetical “I” am looking for a house to purchase for my family, and I find one that I regard as “perfect”. It has the right number of rooms; the way they are laid out is aesthetically pleasing; the neighborhood is to my liking; and the price is just within my means.

However, my hypothetical “daughter” hates the house. It is in a different school district, and moving to it would mean changing schools and not living near her friends anymore. The rooms, the layout, the neighborhood, and so on are of no interest to her.

My hypothetical “wife” thinks the house has possibilities. She has a number of ideas about how to take down a wall here and move a window there. The kitchen has to be modernized (at great cost), and the master bedroom needs to have a walk-in closet added.

All three of us would agree that the house is “real”. But does this house have an objective nature of its own, or is it just an idea – a different idea at that – in each of the minds of my daughter, my wife, and myself? The objective nature of the house must vary according to the idea held by each of the three separate minds, because each mind can know nothing but its own objective reality. In each case the house is perceived as having its own objective nature, but the meaning and thus the reality of the house is different for each of us.

Each of the three of us can perceive that house only from our unique subjective contexts. This is not to say that we can’t
understand each other’s subjective contexts and even empathize with them, but each of our perceptions about that house remains at any particular moment unique, and each perception “corresponds” to the reality-in-itself of that house.

Solipsism does not change the way objectivity is manifested but simply points out that it takes place in an individual mind at a particular moment. The perception of the truth in each case is the truth. It is the truth in the only form available – the truth that exists in your mind when your “modifications” call it to your attention at any particular moment. That is your – and everyone else’s – connection to the verifiably objective external world from this new perspective.

The New Perspective and the Nature of the World

In the case of the house example I have used above I believe most people would agree that a somewhat orderly world was being represented in the minds of the three individuals. But what if one of the three of us in complete sincerity made the claim that the house was really a cruise ship? In conventional objectivity one would have to assume that the individual was drunk or otherwise deranged. From the point of view of that individual, however, it would be his or her truth of the moment.

Whatever you experience cannot be anything but the truth or reality to the insider – you – at the moment you are experiencing it, regardless of how bizarre your perception might seem to others (or to yourself at a later time). Solipsism affirms the existence of a “disorderly” world whenever we perceive it as such. It affirms the truth of any perception, no matter how strange or unreal or irrational it may be judged to be in conventional objectivity.

This is because you and the “object” you experience at any particular moment are one and the same thing – identical – from this redefinition of solipsism. “Subject” and “object”, joined together as an experience of that particular moment, constitute “objectivity”, the absolute truth or reality of that moment.

Terminology from an Inside View
In the specific context of your own subjective awareness, *language* takes on a different dimension. If we examine some familiar terms, we can see how these terms are strikingly altered in meaning from an inside perspective on solipsism.

Let’s look at the notion of perception. A conventional view of perception would include (1) a perceiver, (2) a process of perceiving, and (3) an object or idea perceived. But that is not the way perception is *experienced* subjectively. A perception is experienced as a unity. When we see a tree, we do not usually have in mind that we are engaged in a process of seeing a tree, nor do we focus on ourselves as being the perceiver, nor do we concern ourselves about an object of perception; we simply see a tree.

Also, we cannot, in *subjective experience*, engage in some independent process of perceiving – one without there being an object of that perception (even if that object, for example, is a fantasy) – nor can there be an object (“actually” or in imagination) unless it is taken into our awareness by our process of perceiving it.

This integrated experience – a perception – is what we have at any particular moment. That perception is all that we can know at that moment. And whatever we know at that moment is truth or reality. This means that “perception”, “awareness”, “belief”, “truth”, and “fact” are synonymous terms. Terms, which from a conventional point of view reflect different emphases, are simply the same thing in *experience*. They all mean, “a tree”.

Putting this insight into the form of the definition we have developed so far, we can say that the individual human mind can know nothing but its own truth or reality or fact or perception or awareness or belief at any particular moment.

There are other terms as well that could be employed as synonyms for “a tree”. The result is that all of the terms we have examined are interchangeable and, in effect, surplus. They do not need clear definitions, one from the other, as they do in conventional objectivity (where, of course, they are useful distinctions).

*Solipsism as a “Prison”*
Let’s look again at an outside view of the original definition of solipsism – that we are imprisoned within our sensory apparatus. Do we perceive ourselves as being imprisoned when we see a tree or watch a baseball or game or when we engage in a myriad of other activities, physical and intellectual? In most cases, I should think, the answer would be, “No.”

We can, of course, feel imprisoned – in an unrewarding job or relationship, for instance – but it is our senses that report this fact to us; it is not the senses themselves that constitute a prison. Moreover, what we perceive as our experiences in the succession of moments over a lifetime constitutes totality for us, our world. That kind of “prison” does not necessarily create claustrophobia.

We do not necessarily experience isolation, freedom from standards of shared values, unreality, and all the other bugaboos of an outside view of solipsism. Whatever the sources for these unpleasant or anti-social feelings, they cannot be attributed to the concept of solipsism from the point of view of this redefinition.

So, with our inside perspective on solipsism we have dispensed with what the philosophers feared was an abyss. The beliefs we have held about the world are not suddenly abrogated. We need not deny theology or renounce the scientific method if we believed in them heretofore. Conventional objective truth is not abrogated, nor is our experience of it very different from the way it was experienced previously. Solipsism, as redefined, only adds a perspective. It does not essentially alter, nor does it cancel out, but rather it affirms and validates any and all other perspectives.

The notion of a perspective that is additive can be easily illustrated: If you walk along a main street of a city, you will have one perspective of that street. If you then ride an elevator to the top of an office building and look down at that street you will have a second, an additive perspective, one that does not cancel out your first one.

Recapitulation
I started this redefinition by trying to extract the individual meaning of each of the dictionary definition’s words. It turned out that I did not have to go further than to understand “self” and “modifications” to unravel an internal contradiction that the traditional wording signifies. The implications of that understanding have comprised the remainder of this redefinition.

The original definition reads, “: a theory holding that the self can know nothing but its own modifications and that the self is the only existent thing”. The redefinition reads, “: a theory holding that the individual human mind can know nothing but its own modifications and, therefore, that whatever is present in your awareness at any particular moment is verified as true or real.”

There are two underlying premises for this redefinition:

1) We each acquire our awareness at any particular moment through “modifications” – the content of our individual sensory or intellectual experiences – as they impact our individual minds. (This, of course, is an underlying premise for the original definition of solipsism as well.)

2) The content of our awareness is inevitably affirmed (verified) as true or real for us at the particular moment it comes into awareness, and each truth or reality is locked into its moment of awareness. Any subsequent “correction” becomes the truth or reality of that later moment and is not retroactive.

This means that you are always connected to verified truth and reality at every moment of your awareness.

It became clear that inasmuch as our self’s modifications do not inform us that we are, each of us, the only existent thing, that the second part of the definition is essentially superfluous and internally inconsistent. This is what I referred to as an “inside” perspective.

The appropriate context for solipsism is individual subjectivity, rather than the scientific method or theology, though neither science nor religion nor anything else is excluded from subjective
The criterion for the “where” and the “when” of truth or reality is an individual’s awareness at a particular moment. *Whatever* may be the content of that awareness, it is invariably affirmed and therefore verified as true or real at that moment.

That verification is automatic for whatever you experience in awareness, because in addition to your conscious verifiers you have “built in” ones. In any case, nothing can be a verifier unless it makes sense to you, in awareness or subconsciously, for that purpose.

The flow of your awareness is the series of absolute truths or realities that you experience at particular moments.

UNDERSTANDING SOLIPSISM IN A NEW WAY

An Essential Difference

It is possible now, with the redefined concept, to understand solipsism and its application in an entirely different way from that of the original dictionary definition: The original theory is arguable; the revised one is not.

The original theory, it can be argued, is manifestly false, because it defies common sense or leaves out God or ignores science. A defender of the original theory of solipsism must argue back that because of our separate sensory systems we can be completely misled as to what is the truth about any presumed outside world.

The redefined concept, on the other hand, requires no such argument. The single response that can be given to these and any and all other arguments for and against the truth of solipsism is, “That’s true.” Whatever is present in your awareness at any particular moment is verified as true or real:

1) The idea of solipsism, whether of not correct in some technical sense is too patently absurd and ridiculous to be worthy of attention. “That’s true.”
2) Anyone who believes that solipsism is true will surely go to hell. “That’s true.”
3) I am the only existent thing. “That’s true.”
4) The mind or self of the individual is but one part of the multitude that comprises the single Mind or Self of God. “That’s true.”

If you believe that solipsism, as redefined, is a false concept, an untenable, insane, or subversive concept, then solipsism verifies your belief. A solipsist cannot but accept the principle that the content of truth is the product of belief for you, just as it is for the solipsist.

How, then, while apparently willing to affirm its own negation can solipsism persist as a defined concept? It does so, as has been shown, by being devoid of content. The redefinition only specifies where and when truth is to be found; it cannot and does not in any way specify what truth or reality is. (The definition is, of course, “content” when it is the content of your immediate awareness.)

Solipsism now provides, in effect, a container that can hold any kind of “substance”. It clearly is not a philosophy in itself but rather an overview that can accommodate any and all philosophical systems or ideas along with a limitless number of mundane facts. It is this characteristic that makes the new definition incapable of being breached by any argument or objection. (The reasoning leading up to the definition, of course, may be argued on the basis of internal consistency or perhaps on some other basis.)

The Tyranny of External Validation

We have learned to regard the notion of “subjective” (except, perhaps, in regard to art, literature, and music) as an aberration to be gotten around, so as to be able to perceive the objective real world. It becomes difficult, after the indoctrination we have received in religion or science or “common sense”, to focus on this idea: Those referents for truth or reality – religion, science, common sense – have the same validity when considered as the product of the immediate awareness of an individual human mind as they do “independently”.

A moment’s reflection, though, should reveal that only through our individual awareness can anything be true or real for us. The content of a lecture or a book, the word of an expert, even the
revelation of a “vision” can be ours as truth only through the medium of our own private awareness of it at any particular moment. Therefore, our own individual awareness at any particular moment is the ultimate reference point for truth or reality, whether it is some “universal truth” or any mundane fact.

In summary, then, that awareness (in whatever form) is all that we can have at any particular moment. In the absence of that awareness there is no possibility of truth or reality for an individual; only in awareness at a particular moment can truth or reality take place.

“Subjective Idealism” and Solipsism

Historically, as I mentioned earlier, solipsism has been described as being “extreme subjective idealism”. Now, from an inside perspective, we know that whatever it is that we perceive, we experience it as having reality as its base. (We do not believe that we are seeing an “idea” when we see a tree; we know that we are seeing a real tree in a real world.) Therefore, the notion that solipsism is an extreme form of subjective idealism, while suitable as an outside perspective, makes no sense to an inside view of solipsism. From the latter viewpoint, the concept of solipsism might appropriately be described as “objective realism”.

Even without this change of description, it is clear that the term “solipsism”, which can be retained for its historical association, is a misnomer. We see ourselves as one among many other human beings or selves, as being part of a family and of society-at-large. This being the verifiable truth – you need only consult your own perception (“modification”) on this issue – the ipse is not solus; the self is not alone.

QUESTIONS ABOUT SOLIPSISM

The “Private Language” Question
Language is perhaps the most obvious phenomenon that can be termed “social”. Its existence is clearly the result of a need for communication between people; in particular, people who have become organized sufficiently to establish some rules of language. That state of development implies a human society that has a culture (ideas, values, attitudes, objectives that are more-or-less shared) that requires language for its successful continuity.

Now, if the self were really locked up inside its own sensory apparatus, would not the language of that self be inescapably a private one? But is not the notion of a private language itself a linguistic absurdity? The philosopher Wittgenstein has stated, in effect, that because of this private language problem that solipsism, while true, cannot be expressed.

It is common experience that communication between people may sometimes be difficult to achieve with language. Language is, in a sense, private, because words and concepts have different meanings for different individuals. However, through trial and error, we manage to communicate, to a great extent, what we desire or need to communicate to other people.

As to the technical point stated by Wittgenstein, it is understandably an outside view of solipsism. From the inside view, we know our own modifications and, therefore, our own truth and reality: If I believe that something I have said is understood, then it is true that it is understood; if I believe that I understand what someone has told me, then it is true that I understand.

That truth, of course, takes place in the context of a particular moment; what was believed to have been understood at one moment may, at a later moment, be seen not to have been understood at all. In any case, it is our individual belief that we do communicate to other people with our “private language” that gives language validity in the context of solipsism.

The Subconscious – Unconscious Question
I have focused on the idea that the only thing we can have for truth or reality is the content of awareness. How, then, are we to regard the subconscious and unconscious aspects of ourselves? Don’t they perhaps really rule our lives, making awareness their tool? Don’t we have them too?

For purpose of this discussion only, “subconscious” is intended to mean “knowledge that is just below the surface of awareness and more-or-less available to it”. “Unconscious” is intended to mean “knowledge that is presently – and likely to be permanently – unavailable to awareness”.

While these states can and indeed play a major role in stimulating or subjugating awareness, we can only know about them in awareness. Let’s consider the alternative: If all of our knowledge were unconscious or subconscious, what meaning or use would such knowledge have for us regarding truth or reality? None whatever, I believe, because there would be no content of truth or reality experienced.

In an experiential sense, awareness is “life”. When you are in a state of deep, dreamless sleep, there is, in effect, an absence of life during that state of unconsciousness. We have no access to the subconscious and unconscious aspects of ourselves, at least while they remain subconscious and unconscious. So, the truth of these states, like any other truth, is in an individual’s awareness of them at a particular moment: An expression like “My unconscious rules my life.” is true at the moment it appears in someone’s awareness.

What about the things that we are storing in our subconscious state and recurrently aware of such as friends and relatives, places we have been, the daily events of our lives, and so many other things that make up our general sense of ourselves and the world? Are we supposed to regard these people, places, and events as having no existence just because we don’t happen to be thinking about them at some particular moment?

In terms of the concept of “reality” provided by the newly defined solipsism, they are absent as reality and, therefore, without
existence; just like the subconscious state itself, there is no truth quality about them when they are absent from your awareness.

This is no reason, however, to cease thinking (if you could) that these people, places, and events do continue to exist (or have existed) whether or not we are thinking about them at any particular moment. Solipsism has no intrinsic content, so you can and do provide the content – at any particular moment – that existence is not dependent on your awareness at any particular moment. This is not a contradiction, but a completion of the solipsistic premise: Solipsism only provides the where and when of truth or reality – your awareness at any particular moment. You provide the content.

A related consideration would be activities such as driving an automobile or walking, when we are not really aware that we are engaging in those activities. Those activities are not really “happening”, from the perspective of solipsism. There is an absence of reality or truth when we are not aware of them. Still, when asked, you certainly would be able to report (as the content of your awareness at some later time) that you have driven or walked.

**The Question of Sanity – Insanity**

One of the implications of the redefinition is that people who are labeled insane are also in possession of the truth. Why, then, is it that our truth (namely, that these people are mentally deranged) should prevail over their truths, whatever they may be?

Truth defined in a social sense is not necessarily related in any way to truth as defined by solipsism. The societal truth that prevails is that which has the greatest physical or “moral” power backing it, and it is no respecter of the truth of an individual human mind at a particular moment. This does not diminish the fact that the ideas of those whom the majority designates as insane are true – as true for them as those of other members of society are for them. (I earlier used the example of perceiving a house to be a cruise ship as a “truth” from a solipsistic point of view.)

**Is Truth Relative?**
The question of the relative degree or strength of a particular truth may seem to be pertinent if truth is defined as momentary and subjective, rather than independent of these variables. For example: Something presents itself as a truth, recurring periodically and consistently over a period of years. Then, in a “flash” of insight it appears to be superseded and indeed obviated by a new truth. Is it necessary for this new truth to persist as long as the previous truth to be judged the accurate truth, or does its intensity compensate for its recentness?

As posed above, the question *might* be meaningful from a “outside” perspective. But the truth of the moment, the only truth we can have, is absolute in its moment. Relative strength or degree of truth is precluded as a consideration in terms of our definition. Therefore, a statement like, “I feel more certain now about what the truth is”, while expressing in its *content* the aspect of relativity, is – as an expression of belief – the absolute truth of the moment.

**The Question of Forgetfulness**

Suppose at moment “A” five years ago I told you that blue was my favorite color. Now, at moment “B”, I tell you that I have never liked the color blue. Assuming that this is an honest impression I have now – that I have forgotten that at one time I preferred blue – what is the status of the truth of moment “A”?

The truth of moment “A” is simply absent and does not, therefore, constitute the truth of this present moment “B”. However, its truth in its own moment, five years ago, cannot be affected retroactively, because it was the absolute truth of that moment, just as the content of moment “B” is the absolute truth now.

**How is Truth Determined?**

Suppose I am given some mathematical formula, into which I have no insight whatsoever, for solving a problem in physics. I apply the formula, and the problem is solved. Is something that is intrinsically meaningless to me but which is effective “true”? That there is a mathematical formula and that it solves a problem in physics is true for me. However, in this instance, the real
content of that formula is not just absent as truth; it is not true at all for me. It is not possible for something intrinsically meaningless to enter my awareness; therefore, it cannot be true. The formula could only be true for someone who has the mathematical insight to find meaning in it, and then only when it is present in his or her awareness at a particular moment.

The Scientific Question

Science has made such enormous, tangible advances in knowledge and in control of the elements of our lives that it would seem foolish, at best, to assert that an individual human mind is the instrumentality that affirms reality at particular moments. Clearly, there is a scientific reality beyond our subjective perception of it at all times.

This observation, like any other belief, is validated by solipsism. It constitutes a truth that we cannot and need not deny. However, for “deepest Africa” tribesmen and perhaps others, if they didn’t even know about the scientific method, the observation could not be true. Also, it is absent as truth for us, from the perspective of solipsism, if we happen not to be thinking about science at a particular moment.

Awareness in an individual mind at a particular moment is what gives truth to the statement, “Clearly, there is a scientific reality beyond subjective perception of it at all times.”

The Theological Question

The existence of God in some form is believed in by the vast multitude of human beings. Though there may be differences of view as to the nature of God, the attributes and implications of God, there may be near unanimity as to the fact of God’s existence.

It is no problem for most people that solipsism affirms such a belief. The problem arises for some in that solipsism affirms the non-existence of God as well, if that is what is believed by an individual human mind at a particular moment. Solipsism specifies that (and every other) mind as being the ultimate reference point for truth.
From an outsider’s perspective, this seems to negate the idea that God is the ultimate reference point for truth.

From an insider’s perspective, however, solipsism itself – having no content – cannot negate any idea. For instance, if someone believes that God is the ultimate reference point for truth and that solipsism not only is unnecessary but also misleading, vicious and satanic, solipsism affirms the truth of that belief.

The Question of Ultimate Truth versus Universal Truth

This brings up another related question: What is the definitive “container” of truth? Solipsism claims that the individual human mind is that definitive container and, therefore, it would seem to be a claimant to ultimate (final) truth. For instance, the awareness of the truth of a religion, like Christianity, would be ultimately contained in that individual human mind at a particular moment (or long series of moments) and be absent as truth otherwise.

Christianity, in this example, could claim that it is the container of Universal (all-encompassing) Truth, that it contains Truth for all moments – for eternity. It would contain, along with everything else, the notion of solipsism as, perhaps, a category of heresy.

The assertions of ultimate truth (solipsism) and of universal truth (Christianity) are, in effect, that each contains the other. This seeming conflict is resolvable by perception of two perspectives that do not cancel each other out but which are additive: From my emotional or spiritual point of view it is clear to me that the universal truth in which I believe (say, Christianity) transcends all else, including my own mind and this particular moment. In that sense of truth, solipsism (as heresy or not) is contained in the universal truth of Christianity.

However, from my intellectual point of view it is clear to me that ultimately the universal truth to which I subscribe derives its position as universal truth from the fact that I believe in it at this moment (and at many other particular moments) and that when I am not thinking about that belief, it is absent as a universal truth.
The two points of view are complementary, not opposing, for the individual who employs his or her capacity both to reason and to feel. Both reasoning and emotion are sources of objectivity, validated by the conscious mind, which is the verifier for both ultimate truth and universal truth.

I do not have to abandon my conventional emotional or spiritual perspective in order to perceive the validity of my intellectual perspective. We can view the universe looking through the lens of a telescope or through that of a microscope. One perspective does not invalidate the other. If we wish to do so, we are capable of comprehending the validity of many different perspectives in regard to many different issues.
INTRODUCTION

In Parts 1 and 2, I left “self” and the substituted term “mind” undefined, other than as an entity capable of knowing. As a result, I think you can see that the door is open to any physical/material or metaphysical/spiritual or combined interpretation of self or mind that you happen to find meaningful, that makes sense to you. Solipsism validates any such interpretation or any other kind of interpretation that you can imagine.

To give some examples – but in no way intended to be a complete list – you might attribute to the notion of “self” such images as the self being a small part of the Self of God; or the self being the only existent thing; or the self being the basic unit of society; or the self as a base and evil material body that the immaterial spirit or soul must conquer.

The soul, in the example above, might be your interpretation of “mind”. Others might be: mind as pure intellect, unsullied by emotion; or mind as the entire self; or mind as the meeting point of the soul and the body; or mind as cerebral cortex. Solipsism imposes no requirements as to the content of any interpretation.

In Part 3, I deal with an interpretation of solipsism by defining “self” and “mind” from a classical scientific (material) point of view. It is clear, I trust, that in presenting this particular viewpoint that I do not intend to pre-empt any other interpretation or to attribute special merit to this one in any way. I offer it only as one example of how you can understand “self” or “mind” or both and how you then can draw implications from your understanding of those concepts.
THE EXAMPLE OF CLASSICAL SCIENCE

The Nature of the Universe

The classical, Newtonian scientific view of the universe is untroubled by the problems of quarks, quasars, and black holes, introduced by quantum physics. It is a view that probably all or most present day scientists would regard as untenable in its simplicity. Classical science proclaims that the universe is comprised entirely of physical matter (the ultimate unit of which is the atom) and empty space. It also asserts that the nature of the universe is ultimately knowable and its behavior ultimately predictable through employment of the scientific method.

In this universe described by classical science, we shall regard “self” as a living human individual consisting entirely of a physical body, which is subject entirely to the laws governing all matter. This self contains a “mind”, which is comprised of the neural system, including a brain.

The universe of which this self is a part operates on the principle of cause and effect, or, perhaps more cautiously put, antecedent and consequent. In this view there is no supernatural force, such as God or free will, to interfere with this principle of cause and effect – certainly nothing like Lady Luck, Chance, Fortune, or Fate. No room, then, is left for someone being in charge of the universe; it simply operates within its own self-enforcing natural laws.

“Strict determinism”, as this cause and effect principle is described, does not exclude the living human individual from its domain: Thinking, perceiving, knowing, and so on, if they are to be considered at all, are to be regarded as products – electro-chemical discharges – of the physical body’s brain.

This materialist outlook offers a very cold shoulder to such human notions as creativity, choice, and responsibility: Whatever we create (whether it be art, literature, music, and invention, a business, or a family) and whatever choices we make during our lifetime (such as whom to marry, where to live, what career to pursue) – all of this is
the inevitable result of antecedent events and circumstances over which we have no control whatever. Therefore, we have no responsibility for any of it, can claim no merit for any of it, and cannot be blamed for any of it.

How can such a materialist view be reconciled with this compelling belief of most human beings that they are autonomous, independent beings who can freely make choices (within any external constraints that may exist) for which they are responsible; who can create artifacts that are truly made by them and not by history; whose individual choices and creations are to be accounted to them and not to antecedent events and circumstances? Before pursuing an answer to that question, let's first examine a materialist view of the nature of human behavior.

**Human Behavior**

For the behavior of the universe at large, “cause” and “effect” are the terms that apply. For the narrower focus of human behavior, however, we can substitute the terms, “stimulus” and “response”. Human beings experience stimulus as a need, and our response is an attempt to satisfy that need or to cancel it out, at least temporarily.

It appears that humans have choices as to what their responses will be to any kind of “push” or stimulus. For example, if we are stimulated by hunger we may choose to eat at home or to go to a restaurant or even temporarily put the hunger out of our mind if we are intent on accomplishing some project. Furthermore, at a food market we may make choices from a wide selection of fresh and processed meats, vegetables, and fruits.

Not so, says the materialist view: We only seem to make the choices. A variety of possibilities may present themselves to our awareness, but (in the absence of any countervailing external determinants) the bodily state, the results of the many antecedents in our lives, will determine exactly where and what we “choose” to eat.

The idea that we exercise no control whatever over what we eat sounds incredible. In fact, we are aware of making choices not only of what we eat, but of what we read, with whom we associate, and so
on. We even choose ways of gaining for ourselves “more choice” in the way we live.

We feel that we make our own decisions. However, without our having to make any decisions at all, our hearts beat at specific rates, our glands produce hormones, and our fingernails grow. Whatever else we regard ourselves as being, we are certainly electro-chemical factories, which are for the most part “automated”, operating on a stimulus-response basis.

We may be willing to concede that this is the case for the most part, perhaps, but science has discovered ways to alter heartbeat and to compensate for chemical deficiencies in our bodies. If that knowledge is needed, we can choose to use it. So, do we not, then, more and more have choices even in the case of our “automatic” body chemistry?

The materialist could answer with this example of the role of your choices regarding body chemistry: In the case of your body’s automatically perspiring in an overly warm room, you may also be aware of that room’s temperature effect on your body. The result of that awareness might be that you open a window or turn on an air conditioner.

Or, if in the overly warm out-of-doors, you might move to a shady spot or look for a pool in which to take a dip. However, in such a case your awareness is simply another mechanism by which your body seeks to satisfy its biochemical needs. Whatever “choice” you make is the direct result of internal antecedents, such as your knowledge of ways available for cooling the body and your learned (caused) preferences for doing so.

Most of us are probably agreeable to the idea of an orderly universe, one in which predictions can usefully be made in the light of experience, one in which stars follows a course in space that can be known far in advance. From that viewpoint we can see that to regard human beings as an integral part of that universe – subject to the same laws as all other “matter”, with behavior that is to some degree understandable and predictable – is plausible, though not completely convincing.
Suppose, however, that you are of “two minds” – that you can intellectually accept the materialist interpretation of human behavior, yet still retain your strongly felt attachment to the idea that you are free to act according to your own choices and are responsible for those choices. Can these two seemingly incompatible positions be reconciled? Is there a way for “determinism” and “free will” to coexist?

**Determinism and Free Will**

If we wish to accommodate both determinism and free will, how are we to conceive of their joint existence? The answer is to be found in a set of additive perspectives – the time frame of “before” and “after”.

When faced with a particular set of circumstances, we function on the basis of our feeling that we are free to make the choices that we see as necessary or desirable or appropriate. But, why bother? According to the truth of determinism, “Whatever is going to happen will happen, and nothing we do can make any difference.”

The truth of free will responds: “I get hungry, and I decide what I will eat; I feel lonely, so I seek out a particular friend; I have ideas, so I express them when and where I think they’ll do the most good; I want to have a new desk, so I save money to be able to buy it. Whether or not what I want and how I go about getting it is determined from the beginning of time, I feel it now, and I act on those feelings regardless of whether they make a difference in some “grand design” or not. They make a difference to me right now.”

The emotional truth of free will is the truth that holds sway for most of us before the results of our choices and actions have become manifest. After the results are in view, however, determinism shows its role (as our intellectual truth) in our ability at times to perceive both why we made those choices and initiated those actions and how they influenced the results that we got. Generally, we hope that gaining understanding from our after-the-fact analysis of the relationship of our choices and their results – antecedents and consequents – will determine that we make as good or better choices in the future.
The point is that even if we intellectually comprehend and accept determinism as true, which logically obviates creativity, choice, and responsibility, we nonetheless cannot escape the truth of free will – the feeling of being creative, the feeling of having choices, and the feeling of being responsible for those choices. Even after an analysis that reveals how our choices were inevitably made – choices, which, let’s say, led to disastrous results – such an analysis will not necessarily alleviate the feeling of guilt we experience because of our involvement in that antecedent-consequent chain.

Our intellectual (determinist) and emotional (free will) truths do not cancel each other out but are additive perspectives on ourselves, if we “choose” to see them in that light. The feeling of free will is as much a fact as determinism is, and that feeling can be seen as the equivalent of “free will”.

Although we can resolve the issue for ourselves as just stated, the point of view of classical material science remains adamant: Everything is determined by that which has gone before.

**Solipsism Extended**

We started out in the redefining process by focusing our attention on the mental function of the self – the function that has the ability to “know”. Immediate awareness was to be our criterion for being able to know, but other forms of the self being able to have knowledge was not denied.

Separating out immediate awareness from the rest of the self’s being able to know is entirely artificial from the point of view of materialism. The non-aware bodily processes are identical in source and function to immediate awareness; namely, the experiencing of needs (stimulus) and the striving to satisfy them (response). It is clear that the body knows, independent of conscious awareness to mature, to replace cells, to grow hair and to stop growing hair, to regulate the functions of the organs and glands, and how to do a myriad of such things. Activation of the process of immediate awareness is itself the result of the body’s knowing.
Such being the case, a materialist point of view would dictate that both “aware” and “non-aware” be included in a definition of knowing. Physiological, biological, subconscious and unconscious knowing would be on the same level as immediate awareness in such a definition. Each cell of the body and each atom in each cell would be construed as having its own knowledge at any particular moment. Therefore, for any particular moment – and in this case, let us specify its being one second of clock time – it would require numerous thick volumes to record the knowledge of a single human body in that second.

It is appropriate to concede that “truth”, in a materialist interpretation of the self as a living human body, is indeed whatever a human body knows at any particular moment. However, recognizing our limitation, as self-knowing individuals, to the content of our immediate awareness – as it is spelled out in the more limited redefinition of solipsism – we are constrained to dealing only with that awareness as it reaches us. The materialist extension of solipsism to include the entire human bodily process might be considered to be correct, but, as we have noted, we have no access to our body’s knowledge beyond our immediate awareness of it.

Solipsism Obviated

The materialist viewpoint specifies that the human body is identical (in that it is composed of atoms) with all other matter. How does this identity affect a definition that locates truth or reality in an individual human body? In a larger sense of materialism, its effect is to obviate any meaning to such a definition.

In that larger, purely materialistic context, the “self” or “mind” would have to be defined as being the entire material universe, rather than a part of it labeled a living human body. Indeed, there could be no parts, because the self would have to be considered as a singular oneness, all the processes of change in its aspect, its varying manifestations being identical with itself. “Space does not separate us, it connects us” (Alan Watts). The universal self would be its own “cause and effect”, negating even the category. It is only in reference to an alternative that a “category” is required.
This particular materialist view of the universe, it must be reiterated, is only one of an infinite number of viewpoints “authorized” by solipsism. The only criterion for the truth of this view is that it be believed by an individual human mind at a particular moment.