

The Solipsistic Society
The False Notion that Nothing and Nobody Else Matters
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
August 4, 2019

Solipsism is the belief the only thing one can be sure exists is one's self. The word literally means "alone self," though "self only" is a smoother translation. Its most familiar example is René Descartes' famous conclusion, *Cogito ergo sum*. To simplify, in his attempt to determine what is real, Descartes argued his way to the one truth he believed indubitable, "I think, therefore I am." To be clear, however, he only meant he could not doubt the existence of his own mind, of the thing that thinks. Considering the possibility a malignant demon might be deceiving him, Descartes determined, "I will suppose that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, figures, sounds, and all external things, are nothing better than the illusions of dreams, by means of which this being has laid snares for my credulity; I will consider myself without hands, eyes, flesh, blood, or any of the senses, and as falsely believing that I am possessed of these."¹

The idea there was no world outside his mind, not even his own body, sounds pretty crazy, but it's unlikely he actually believed these things. Descartes was merely performing a thought experiment in his effort to understand metaphysics, the underlying nature of reality. Today, given our understanding of physics, we don't need to imagine a malignant demon to grasp that the external world is far different from what our limited senses perceive, and even these perceptions are translated into images interpreted by our brains and are "seen," to use the term loosely, in the very same regions of the brain that see the images we dream or imagine. So, at the very least, we must conclude the world outside our minds isn't exactly what we perceive it to be, and what we perceive it to be isn't altogether unlike what we only dream or imagine it to be.

This then sets us up for what is a classic philosophic problem, the mind/body duality. In short, there can be only one, mind or body. For if both exist, they must be so different from each other that they can't possibly interact. Reality must, therefore, be entirely mind or entirely matter. The materialistic view is summed up well in Edward Feser's book, *Philosophy of Mind: A Beginners Guide*, "There is, in short, no such thing as immaterial substance, or soul, or spirit, nor any aspect of human nature which, in principle, eludes explanation in purely physical terms."² In this view, even our thoughts and feelings are physical, caused by chemical and molecular reactions.

¹ Russell, Bertrand, *Wisdom of the West*, Crescent Books, Inc., Rathbone Books Limited, London, 1959, p. 121.

² Feser, Edward, *Philosophy of Mind: A Beginners Guide*, Oneworld Publications, Oxford, England, 2006, 2011, p. 51.

The view that only mind is real is expressed in Descartes' *Rationalism* and Plato's *Idealism*, and in the thinking of modern gurus like Wayne Dyer who says, "When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change," or Deepak Chopra who believes, "There is only consciousness. The universe is consciousness." Proponents of this mindset would argue everything that appears to be physical is really just a product of our minds, or, perhaps, of some larger consciousness than our own.

I say all of this only to point out the notion that nothing exists outside our own minds isn't entirely without support. Many philosophers take the possibility seriously, although philosophy hasn't yet given us an indubitable metaphysic, nor has physics yet discovered a unified theory of everything. In short, we still don't know the nature of reality. We don't yet fully grasp what it means to exist. Even so, most of us would think Descartes a madman, as we would anyone else, if he actually believed his mind and only his mind is all that exists, or, for the empiricists among us, that his is the only mind that really matters.

Yet, as peculiar and counterintuitive as solipsism seems to most of us, how many go about their lives behaving as if it's true, that they are the only ones who matter and what they think and believe is the only possible truth? That's what I mean by the term, *solipsistic society*. Although the belief one's self is the only self that's real—that one's mind is the only mind that matters—would seem to contradict any notion of society, I'm referring to a society of minds that behave as if their individual minds, their beliefs, their interpretation of events are the only minds that matter, the only beliefs that are true, the only interpretations that are real.

Social media is a good example of what I mean. In his book, *Think Before Your Like*, Guy Harrison, an award-winning journalist who writes a lot about thinking, begins by mentioning what is becoming a familiar sight these days, two friends entered a coffee shop, ordered a drink, sat down together, then, "Over the next ten minutes or so," Harrison says, "they never spoke. Instead they stared down at their phones and busied themselves poking and swiping on miniscule touch screens in total silence."³ That's a pretty good example of what I mean by solipsistic society, people together but not really sharing their minds with each other.

Maybe you don't use social media, or you agree with those who, as Harrison says, think "Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, [and] Twitter" are "nothing more than glorified time-sucks that enable us to share inane videos, brag about the minor triumphs of our common lives, call strangers mean names, and gobble up fake news."⁴ Yet, according to his research, the vast majority of Internet users around the world are on social media, including 65 percent in the E.U., 71 percent in the U.S., 76 percent in Africa, 82 percent in Latin America, and 86 percent in the Middle East.⁵ And the number of Internet users around the world are similarly

³ Harrison, Guy P., *Think Before Your Like*, Prometheus Book, New York, NY, 2017, p. 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

high, ranging from between about 70 percent to 100 percent in various countries. These same stats are also close to the number of those who have smartphones.

“It’s remarkable how these handheld devices have become so important so fast,” Harrison says. “Americans check their phones, on average, nearly fifty times per day. Those in the eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old bracket do it *eighty-two times per day*, on average. Within five minutes of waking up, more than 40 percent of people have already looked at their phones for the first time of the day.”⁶ A high percentage of us also check them before going to bed, and about half do so at some point during the night. “Collectively,” he says, “American eyes are engaging with those tiny screens about eight billion times per day.”⁷

Not that I’m disparaging social media or those who use it. I appreciate technology especially because it enables us to connect with others in unprecedented ways. I’m only pointing out that if we’re not thoughtful about how we use it, especially by intentionally disciplining ourselves to overcome its pitfalls, then we might end up like those two friends in the coffee shop, engaging less with those around us more often than not. A major pitfall, as far as I’m concerned, is that disengaging with the world around us, while communicating with or about people who have no physical presence, makes it easy for us to dehumanize, even demonize, others. Human communication is far more than just speaking words, let alone typing brief quips and phrases. Experiencing body language and vocal affect are crucial pieces of our brain development and interactions. If we’re not doing so, if our kids aren’t doing so, we’re not yet sure what the impacts on their neural development and ability to socialize will be.

Allison Stranger, for example, a professor at Middlebury College in Vermont, was physically assaulted by students in 2017 while they were raging against a speaker they disapproved of. As the political science professor tried to escort him safely off campus, she was reportedly shoved by one protestor as another pulled her hair so hard, she “suffered a concussion and whiplash injury”⁸ requiring six months of physical therapy. “What alarmed me most,” she later said, “was what I saw in the eyes of the crowd. Those who wanted the event to take place made eye contact with me. Those intent on disrupting it steadfastly refused to do so. They couldn’t look at me directly, because if they had, they would have seen another human being.”⁹

That’s another good example of what I mean by solipsistic society, the belief one’s own mind is all that matters. For it to work we have to convince ourselves others don’t matter by dehumanizing them, either in the classic analogue way of not looking them in the eye, or not considering them worthy of looking us in the eye; or in the new digital way of destroying

⁶ Ibid., p. 18f.

⁷ Ibid., p. 19.

⁸ Lukianoff, Greg, and Haidt, Jonathan, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2018, p. 88.

⁹ Ibid.

them on social media without ever having to look at them or interact with them at all. Remember, the word *respect* means, “to see.” If we can’t see others, or don’t acknowledge their humanity, we don’t have to respect them. As Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt say in *The Coddling of the American Mind*, “In the age of social media, cyber trolls, and fake news, it is a national and global crisis that people so readily follow their feelings to embrace outlandish stories about their enemies.”¹⁰ This is so because a solipsistic society—a society of individuals who behave as if theirs are the only minds that matter—must solve the problem of other minds. Establishing doctrines, beliefs, and now technologies that make it possible to ignore the minds of others are effective ways of going about it.

Another pitfall of social media that adds to the problem of solipsism is that it too easily surrounds users in echo chambers that cater to their likes and filter for their biases. Again, as Lukianoff and Haidt say, “Both physical and the electronic isolation from people we disagree with allow the forces of confirmation bias, groupthink, and tribalism to push us still further apart,”¹¹ not to mention search engine algorithms that repeatedly present us only with information our browsing habits suggest we’re most interested in. Harrison adds that, “Opposing viewpoints, contrary arguments, as well as random and novel ideas can become rare or nonexistent inside a filter bubble. Algorithms serve up whatever information is deemed most likely to make you happy and content—reality and your personal growth be damned.”¹²

The only other point I’d make about the relation of social media to solipsistic society is that the current President of the United States is a master of it and is also, in my view, one of the most solipsistic thinkers I’ve ever witnessed, as evidenced by what I take as an extreme lack of concern for others and complete disinterest in and disregard for the objective realities that contradict his own whim-based emotional thinking. But most technology only makes us better at doing the things we’re already good at, including the bad things we’re good at. Dehumanizing others, demonizing them for not thinking like us, and constructing echo chambers in which we’re not exposed to ideas and beliefs different from our own are things human societies have been doing for thousands of years. So, today’s social media is being used in ways indicative of solipsistic social tendencies that have led to many instances of injustice and cruelties throughout human history.

We saw the same thing happen with the advent of corporate owned and controlled media in the 1990s, during which news went from being unbiased information we all needed to know (or at least strived to be), to being biased information a few people wanted us to know. Fox News is the original filter bubble of the modern era and is still serving that purpose for the millions of conservative viewers who haven’t fully embraced social media, just as MSNBC now does for those of a different political persuasion.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 259.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 131.

¹² Harrison, *ibid.*, p. 74.

So, what's happened? How did our society become solipsistic? Why do so many of us accept the truth of whatever is in our heads over objective facts? Why are we so willing to dwell within the obvious biases of our filter bubbles and echo chambers, while utterly despising outsiders, innovators, and dissenters? To be brief, I'll lay much of the blame on our postmodern milieu. Postmodernism began in the late 1950s in reaction against the Enlightenment of the modernist era, which placed great faith in objective reality and truth; in reason, logic, and science; in the belief there is something essential about human nature that connects us all; that language refers to real things; and that we can learn to better understand nature by developing general theories about how the world works. Postmodernism rejected all of this, external reality, objective truth, reason and science, believing, instead, that human nature is relative only to individuals and that none of us, therefore, share anything in common; and that all truth is subjective. In short, postmodernism leads adherents to believe one truth is as good as another and that there's little need to prove what one chooses to believe with facts or reason because facts and reason are BS.

Until now, Unitarian Universalism was defined by its historic commitment to Enlightenment thinking, including its emphasis on reason, science, and our common humanity. Unfortunately, as we discovered at the recent General Assembly here in Spokane, this is no longer the case. Truth is now based upon individual feelings, reason and logic are considered forms of oppression, human nature is so fluid it's not possible for us to relate to each lest we share very specific genetic qualities, and dissenting voices must be squelched before they burst our filter bubble. Fortunately, since the publication and distribution of my controversial book, *The Gadfly Papers*, the reaction to it indicates there are still plenty of Unitarians in our pews who maintain the historic values of our liberal religious tradition and are now pushing back against the postmodern relativism seeking to supplant our free and independent congregations.

Another reason so many of us give in to solipsism is our response to the what many psychologists consider the fundamental anxiety facing each of us, the conflict between freedom and belonging. If we are truly free to be ourselves, we face the possibility of standing out in a crowd and being rejected by the status quo. If being accepted and included by others is our only goal, then we can never be truly accepted and included because we must suppress our own authentic expression. It would appear, perhaps because we are such social creatures, that the need to belong has the stronger pull on us most the time. That's the whole point of Erich Fromm's book, *Escape from Freedom*. We like the idea of freedom but are emotionally terrified of it because it means isolation. If we can't get over this fear, he suggests our societies inevitably become totalitarian, which is what's happening at this moment in history, even as liberals, I'm sorry to admit, are leading the charge toward collective groupthink.

Just this week, for example, I discovered an article in the *UU World* magazine stating the “trinity of errors”¹³ in Unitarian Universalism are *individuality*, *exceptionalism*, and our *allergy to authority*. The article, written by the current UUA President, borrows this criticism from a longer lecture by another UU minister who repeatedly suggests we must overcome these errors. “In this process,” its author, Rev. Frederic Muir says, “we will create something that has eluded Unitarian Universalism: a doctrine of church.”¹⁴ I don’t have time now to further discuss this 2012 lecture, which seems to serve as the blueprint for the sweeping changes that are now fundamentally and, in my opinion, detrimentally altering our liberal religion. But this one example, the call for us to end individualism and embrace authority by replacing it with a church doctrine should get the point across. If we can’t overcome our fear of freedom, we become totalitarian. Either we become sadistic, Fromm says, by swallowing the wills of others so we can be one with them while maintaining our own freedom, or we become masochistic, giving our freedoms over to others so we can feel we belong. Sadomasochistic relationships represent the unhealthy way of dealing with the dilemma of freedom or belonging.

Somehow, amidst this latest surge of authoritarianism and groupthink, a new paradigm has quietly overcome most of us, the presumption that we have a right not to hear ideas we disagree with. Whether it manifests on Fox News, on the campus of liberal arts colleges, or during a meeting of the most liberal religion in America, people across the political and ideological spectrum now take it for granted they don’t have to tolerate dissenting opinions. “Ideas hurt,” they say. “Ideas are harmful.” *Harmful* is the new word for *heresy*. It’s the way we shut people down. Harmful things are dangerous, and dangerous things must be controlled and forbidden. Dissenters must be dehumanized and demonized and, ultimately, silenced. For it is our right not to hear ideas that cause us pain, and our moral obligation as a solipsistic society is to protect our bubble-headed members from being exposed to dangerous ideas so their heads don’t pop.

It’s not a pretty picture, I admit, but it’s one I hope we can all consider, whether I have painted it accurately or not. It is difficult to look at, I know, even as I face my own existential crisis, fearing what liberalism, once my anchor, is becoming, and, even more so, disturbed to witness the religion that has given my life so much meaning and purpose becoming something I don’t recognize, foreign to the values that hold me steady. So, I have drawn my line in the sand, fuzzy as it is, have rolled up my sleeves, and am ready to take my licks as I continue to fight for what I believe is right and good in this world, including reason, freedom of conscience, and our common humanity.

¹³ <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/president-spring-2019>

¹⁴ “From iChurch to Beloved Community: Ecclesiology and Justice,” Fredric J. Muir, 192nd Berry Street Essay Delivered at the Ministerial Conference June 20, 2012, Phoenix, AZ.