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***Phenomenology, Epistemology and Solipsism***

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*Abstract:* In the philosophical discourse, it is normally presupposed that “solipsism” is something bad, something we have to avoid. Almost no philosopher has claimed of being a solipsist, while most of them have accused other philosophers of maintaining solipsist theories. My idea is that, indeed, there are good reasons to disapprove solipsism, but mainly when it is of an ontological kind. On the contrary, as far as epistemic solipsism is concerned, there are much less possibilities to reject it, while there are some good reasons to endorse it. Epistemic solipsism can be defined as the position according to which each subject can know only within the limits of her/his direct experience, and that all other kinds of knowledge one is supposed to have are just believes which, even in the best case, cannot become anything more than well-founded believes. Such a position could actually seem quite trivial, or a sterile linguistic sophistry. All the same, in my talk I will try to show that a) epistemic solipsism logically derives from our most common and “natural” understanding of knowledge, i.e. as *adaequatio rei ac intellectu*, or as correspondence between believes and facts and that b) if we try to analyse such a (either trivial or unwelcome) result in some depth, we may discover that epistemic solipsism, as trivial as it may be, once acknowledged, brings into focus some fundamental structures of world, mind and experience, and it following enables a virtuous epistemic consciousness as well as adequate (rational and emotional) intersubjective intercourses.

**0. Introduction**

“Solipsism”, as well as its kins “solipsistic” and “solipsist”, mostly sounds as a bad or, to say it better, negative, perhaps even sad words. Actually, they can hardly be considered as words belonging to the common everyday language. They definitely have a “technical” tone. As a matter of fact, to name someone a “solipsist” is quite uncommon. By hearing it, the best we can make of such a statement is to connect it to the idea that someone is solitary or, perhaps, interpret it as a synonym of “autistic”.

It is decidedly in a theoretical, more precisely philosophical, environment, indeed, that the terms “solipsism”, “solipsist” and “solipsistic” can be considered at home. In such a discourse-world, solipsism is a recurrent theme. More precisely, it is an epithet philosophers have used against other philosophers or against some philosophical theories. There is almost no philosopher (nor scientist) in History who has proclaimed himself, or his theory, “solipsistic”. Quite on the contrary, to call a philosopher and his/her thought “solipsistic” is normally considered a way to judge them inconsistent, weak, aporetic – or, on the opposite, but still negatively, much too strong, because solipsism is, in the end, a position immune to falsifiability.

Also in the cases some philosophers have sustained theories close to solipsism – as it has been done in the probably most extreme and knowingly way by some Indian schools of thought, signally in the Yogacara tradition –, they have

normally stressed the difference between the Absolute unique mind and the singular individual one is (or believes to be). In a certain way, such a view can be considered as deriving first of all from the thesis that there is only *one* reality, and then from a certain form of idealism. However, even if solipsism is normally considered by the opponents of idealism as the natural consequence of any idealistic theory, it must be stressed that such an entailment is not necessary. One could sustain that there is no evidence “outside of the mind” and, nevertheless, admit that such a mind is not her/his own mind – thus, obviously, admitting some kind of internal (even if, perhaps, delusive) differentiation of *the* one unique mind: There is only one mind, but it is not *my* mind. Finally, one could endorse idealism without endorsing monism, by saying that there is nothing outside the minds – except other minds!

All these disputes actually concern what could be called ontological solipsism. This kind of solipsism is surely connected to *epistemological* solipsism, but, as I will try to show, ontological solipsism is not necessarily entailed by the latter.

Epistemological solipsism as well has commonly also been strongly opposed by most philosophers and philosophers' critics. Indeed, a solipsistic view on knowledge seems to amount to the dismissal of one of the main concerns of epistemology as such, i.e. the possibility to achieve *objective* and *universally valid* knowledge. This validity seems to be possible only if what is known is not a private possess of a single subject. In this sense, subjective knowledge is supposed to be the opposite of objective knowledge. While the first one does not go beyond the limited sphere of one single subject, objective knowledge is something which can (and, to a certain extent, should) be acknowledged by any possible subject – at least by any subject which is capable of knowing. Following, in this conceptual setting subjective knowledge is considered to be a kind of knowledge which can not be considered to be *universally valid*.

A recurring epitome of subjective knowledge, which pervades also naïve, extra-philosophical and extra-academical ideas of knowledge and objectivity, is taste: What one person believes to be delicious can be “really” so, but only for her, i.e. not objectively for everyone. In this sense, even if she is not wrong about the fact that a certain food tastes good, her statement is not valid for everyone. Therefore, taste is a subjective matter, which amounts to say that there is no objective taste.

By itself, such an example does not properly compel to assimilate subjectivism and anti-objectivism. One could still think that something is objectively there, but not everyone can have access to it. This is often the thought of most of us in matter of taste, indeed. And Kant's critique of the aesthetic judgment goes out of such a quite ordinary experience. However, this is not the place to engage a inquiry into the faculty of taste and the objectivity of taste.

More in general, we can see that in daily life people often speak about what seems to them to be so or so, but they usually agree about the existence of something on which they can't but agree – as, for example, that they exist and that there is some kind of communication happening between them. They can be interested in apprehending the opinions of others, but this does normally have limits, beyond which the opinions of others do not simply sound weird, but even unacceptable. Indeed, one could rationally admit that, though this is implausible, not universally accessible worlds do exist. One could be even eager to know something about a totally different world, which one oneself cannot have any direct access to, but to which some other person is assumed to have one. In principle, I believe that there is no way that rule out such a possibility, and one cannot but admit that, though implausible, that world could exist. One person could indeed believe in a world totally different from one's own and such that, though inaccessible for her, is as objective as the one she experiences and knows. The existing inaccessible world were, following, a world about which there cannot be any agreement based on verification. However, the very unacceptable the beliefs are not the ones of

some particularly original, or even alien, persons, which may sound weird, but not impossible, but rather the “philosophical” hypotheses, which present one with the idea that s/he does not exist, or that s/he does not have a body, or that her/his interlocutor is just a bat in a vat.

However, we must here leave the problem of plausibility and comprehensibility aside. The aim of this paper is in fact to challenge the idea of solipsism from a (phenomenologico-)epistemological point of view. More precisely, to explain its proper sense, to assert its rationality and even to clarify why its acknowledgment and its conscious endorsement is virtuous *also* from an *intersubjective*, social point of view.

If we exclude some quite recent theories about methodology in psychological and cognitive studies (signally Fodor's “methodological solipsism”), solipsism has been mainly considered a risk to avoid. As I already mentioned, to brand some philosophy as “solipsist” equals declaring it wrong. Epistemologically seen, solipsism is considered to go hand in hand with the bankrupt of objective knowledge and as necessarily leading to relativism and skepticism.

One philosopher who has notoriously been suspected and even repeatedly accused of solipsism is Edmund Husserl. Quite interestingly, though, even if he rejects such accuses in various occasions, he also openly endorses a methodological solipsism and even asserts the necessity of its endorsement in order to rigorously realize the phenomenological science<sup>1</sup>.

Most of the *Husserlianer* have tried to “save” Husserl from the accuses of solipsism. To this aim, they have sometimes even had to separate wheat from the chaff, dismissing some of Husserl's statements and self-understandings. For them, then, solipsism, even if sometimes openly invoked by Husserl himself, is a risk from which Husserl's thought and the “healthy” phenomenology we can inherit from him should be saved. Even if in what follow I will not really contend with an interpretation nor a commentary of Husserl's thought, not to mention a “philological” investigation of it, I cannot help to declare that such “rescue-missions” are hopeless in principle, because Husserl's epistemological thought is founded on an understanding of knowledge and its mechanisms which necessarily lead to solipsism and, therefore, Husserl's epistemology cannot but be solipsistic. To save Husserl from being Husserl is, moreover, not only a desperate enterprise, but also a useless one, *because being a solipsist is not bad at all* – as Husserl himself knew very well.

To put it briefly, my thesis, which is not but minimally a interpretation of Husserl, is: Knowledge is a solipsistic achievement and to acknowledge this permits us a better understanding of the complexity of our experiences and of their mutual relations, as well as the relations they entertain with various kinds of contents, with the outer world in general, and with other subjects in particular. To acknowledge the solipsism of knowledge is an important step in our understanding of ourselves and, therefore, it enables a more adequate form of self-consciousness. Such acknowledgement fosters a better capacity to estimate our intercourses with other subjects. Even if the acknowledgement of the “solipsismness” of knowledge does not necessarily make us better people, it leads to a better understanding of our cognitive situation as well as of ourself in the world, and it following enables better behaviours. Epistemic solipsism and its acknowledgement enable a virtuous epistemic consciousness as well as adequate (rational and emotional) intersubjective intercourses. This is, at least, what I will try to show in the following paragraphs.

### **1. A “strict” definition of knowledge**

In the Introduction, I stated that in the present paper I do not aim neither to offer a reconstruction of Husserl's thought, nor to comment it. Nevertheless, due to my “Husserlian background”, i.e. the years I spent trying to

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understand, interpret and, to some extent, further develop Husserl's phenomenological thought, I will undertake my "plea for solipsism" in an epistemological frameworks I have gained by means of such studies and researches. Therefore, the following reflections on knowledge and solipsism are (at least partly) based on Husserl's definitions of knowledge, its components and its dynamics.

The thesis concerning the solipsismness of knowledge entails that knowledge is "subjective". In order to show why and how solipsism is a necessary attribute of "pure" knowledge and why it is not bad at all, I will then have to point out why knowledge is something "subjective" and in which sense. Contrary to most of the *defensores husserli*, I argue for acknowledgement that (what I believe to be) a sound Husserlian epistemology has to be declared "subjectivist", even if this does not entail that what is known is a private matter or thing, that the subject creates, contains or forms the objects of knowledge.

We can summarise some main forms of subjectivism as follows:

#### Definitions of Ontological Subjectivism

OS1: Being = What a subject "makes"

OS2: Being = What is presented (or represented) to a subject

#### Definitions of Epistemological Subjectivism

ES1: Knowable = What the subject "forms" / What the subject give its own forms to

ES2: Knowable = What the subject has direct or intuitive access to

ES3: Knowable = What the subject has "inside of" itself

The view I endorse here could be called a radical empiricist view of Husserl's phenomenology, according to which what counts is experience or a part of it. This does not commit, anyway, to the view according to which

to be = to be the possible content of an experience or to be the content of a possible experience

The only form of solipsism such a radical empiricism amounts to is ES2. In order to understand why this is the case and what this more precisely means, it is necessary to see *how* knowledge is made and what are the roles of the elements contained in it, included the subject and its intellectual as well as sensuous powers.

Outgoing from Husserl's LU, I assume that knowledge is an event – more precisely an experience – in which the intentional correlate of two distinct acts come to coincidence. More precisely, there is knowledge when an act intending something in an empty way, i.e. without *giving* it lively, is fulfilled by a corresponding intuition of that same content, i.e. by an intuitive act which has the same objectual correlate of the empty intention.

Even if the relationship between intuitions and concepts is different from the Kantian model, also in an "Husserlian" phenomenology without a conjunction of intuitions and concepts there is no real knowledge. According to the idea of knowledge exposed in the *Logical Investigations*, there is no knowledge unless:

1. there are two distinct acts;
2. each of the two acts is provided with an own content (in the language of the *LI* called "act-matters");
3. there is a coincidence between the two contents;
4. *the coincidence is intuitively given as well.*

The latter point has to be stressed. It implies that the coincidence happens in a somehow further experience which is strictly connected to the two other intentions.

If we accept this idea, that is that there is knowledge when the coincidence between an empty intention and an

intuition is seen, then it seems unavoidable to affirm that all entailed intentional acts belong to one and the same stream of consciousness. This means that the acts must belong to the same subject in order to have knowledge.

We can schematically outline this idea of knowledge as follows:

- a. to know  $p$  = to “see” that  $p$  is the content both of an intuition and of an empty intention = to see that the correlate of a signitive intention and the content of an intuitive intention overlap
- b.  $(A \text{ knows that } p) \rightarrow (A \text{ has a concept of } p) \cap (A \text{ sees } p)$
- c.  $(\text{Knowledge of } p) \rightarrow (p \text{ is the content of an empty intention } X) \cap (p \text{ is the content of a fulfilling intention } Y) \cap (X \text{ and } Y \text{ happen in and belong to the same stream of experience})$
- d. Knowledge  $\rightarrow$  one unitary Subject

In brief, knowledge is always for, or of, someone.

## 2. Triviality of subjectivism (and solipsism)

The simple acknowledgement that there is knowledge only insofar there is a subject, does not seem to say anything relevant. Actually, if we conceive knowledge as a kind of experience, it is quite obvious that there is a subject. All the more if we assume a (early) Husserlian stance, according to which a subject is nothing else than a stream of consciousness. In this sense, knowledge is clearly something subjective, but this does not seem to say anything interesting about how knowledge is and which specific role subjectivity plays in it. Ultimately, we have just stated what Ralph Barton Perry already analysed under the label of “ego-centric predicament”. Perry, indeed, argued that the ego-centric predicament «is a predicament in which every investigator finds himself when he attempts to solve a certain problem. It proves only that it is impossible to deal with that problem in the manner that would be most simple and direct. To determine roughly whether  $a$  is a function of  $b$ , it is convenient to employ Mill's "Joint Method of Agreement and Difference," that is, to compare situations in which  $b$  is and is not present. But where  $b$  is "I know," it is evidently impossible to obtain a situation in which it is not present without destroying the conditions of observation. In other words, the problem of determining the modification of things by the knowing of them is a uniquely difficult problem. The investigator here labors under a peculiar embarrassment. But this fact affords no proper ground for any inference whatsoever concerning the true solution of the problem; hence it affords no argument for any theory in the matter, such as ontological idealism»<sup>2</sup>.

In the Husserlian perspective I have been endorsing here, I have not committed to any particular epistemological nor ontological position, yet. I have just said that knowledge, inasmuch as it is an experience, is something “subjective”, in the sense that it is knowledge “for” a subject. Such a form of “subjectivism” is, so to say, “epistemo-ontologically neutral”. Ultimately, I am simply asserting that, in order to have knowledge, inasmuch knowledge is an experience... there must be experience!

What I am showing, then, is a triviality. However, I think that this triviality entails some implications. They are also trivial, but mostly neglected. I believe that such a neglect has some both theoretical and practical consequences, which I assume to be not particularly good. To show this, primarily I have to face Perry's critique to the subjectivist idealists.

According to the kind of solipsism I am trying to represent here, i.e. ES2, the subject has a quite minimal role, or even no role at all, in the constitution of the structures of the known objects. The only role which, according to one of

the most famous (and maybe also abused) principles of Husserl's epistemology, i.e. the so called "a priori correlation", should be ascribed to subjectivity in knowledge corresponds to the operations – which, at a basic level, should simply be understood as bodily movements – the subject has to perform in order to enable the manifestation of objects. This, however, does not mean that such operations influence or even determine the contents of experience and knowledge – unless the subject itself, understood as the noetic-hyletic side of experience, is the object under observation. If I turn my head to see the table over there, I do not think necessary to assume that I am creating or forming the table as well as whatever will happen to appear during and after my head turn.

It follows that my version of "Husserl's epistemology" is immune to the critique elaborated by Perry against any form of "ontological idealism", which is illegitimately derived by the "ego-centric predicament". However, as I have avoided to commit to any form of idealism, it seems that the acknowledgement of the subjectiveness of knowledge is trivial and ultimately irrelevant. The same should consequently be said about solipsism, which would simply say that, as knowledge is not possible without a subject, my knowledge is not possible without me or that the knowledge of any subject is not possible without that one subject. Unless I assume that what becomes known is such only for me and the "truth" of something is my private property, or I (and only I) am the one who "forges" the shape of the world, my "solipsistic stance" is nothing more than a frivolous and maybe overblown pose.

To understand why this is not the case and why, on the contrary, there is a way to understand the "trivial" matter of fact of solipsism that permits us to reveal aspects of knowledge which are perhaps not so trivial, we have to reflect a bit on what this apparently trivial matter of fact really entails.

Let's summarize what we have been able to state so far:

- i. Knowledge is an experience;
- ii. As such, knowledge is subjective;
- iii. Knowledge is always "someone's" knowledge. We can speak of a *Jemeinigkeit* of knowledge;
- iv. The mere statement that knowledge is something "subjective", is trivial and irrelevant;
- v. To be relevant, the *role* of the subject in knowledge should be more than the one of "observer" of truth, i.e. more than being an irrelevant part of every possible knowledge;
- vi. The "Husserlian" epistemology I have endorsed so far does not imply any "productive" role of the subject;
- vii. the *role* of the subject, understood in the aforementioned way, in matters of knowledge is irrelevant.

Now, if the subject of experience and knowledge does not contribute to the determination of what knowledge is about, why should it be *epistemologically* relevant to consider that there is no knowledge without a subject?

Let us consider once again Perry's critique to any form of ontological idealism which is supposed to derive from the ego-centric predicament. He says:

«In order to discover if possible exactly how a T is modified by the relationship  $R^c(E)$ , I look for instances of T out of this relationship, in order that I may compare them with instances of T in this relationship. But I can find no such instances, because "finding" is a variety of the very relationship that I am trying to eliminate. Hence I can not make the comparison, nor get an answer to any original question by this means. But I can not conclude that there are no such instances; indeed, I now know that I should not be able to discover them if there were» (Perry 1910)

So, to be relevant in terms of epistemology and ontology, the relation to the subject must be considered essential to T (the world of knowledge). However, it is impossible to say what is the difference between the world with me and the world without me. Therefore, we have no means to establish if the subject is essential to the way the world appears.

All we can say is that there is no knowledge without a subject. In which sense could such a discovery be interesting? To answer this question, we must pay attention to the last sentence of the passage just quoted “I know that I should not be able to discover them [*scil.* instances of the world without me] if there were”. The discovery of the ego-centric predicament offers us, then, some relevant “positive” informations, that is that the world could be *more* than what I can know about it, *and* that I will never be able to know if this is the case or not. I believe that to realise this permits us to understand also something more, namely that the subjectiveness of knowledge entails solipsism and that the “limits” of knowledge we discover by means of the reflection on the ego-centric predicament permits us to state that *there is* something beyond knowledge.

To achieve this “positive” result from the analysis of the ego-centric predicament, we must first of all realise that the ego at stake in it can never be “any” subject, that is a subject whatsoever, but it is always one's own ego, viz. an individual singular identical subject. Not simply *a* subject, but rather *one* subject. The unity of the subject must be, for all the aforesaid, particularly stressed. It is not only impossible to state a difference between the world in relation to a subject and the world without such relationship. It is also impossible *for each subject* to know how the world is without her own very self.

In this sense, a form of subjectivism like the one I think to be entailed by an “Husserlian” theory of knowledge is relevant *even if* we preserve it from falling into a form of Idealism. We must yet commit to solipsism. In fact, to assert that knowledge is necessary something “subjective” is trivial and meaningless, *unless* we assert that the relation to the subject is – in some to be better defined way - essential to what is known, *or unless* we reduce knowledge to *one* subject.

## **2. *reductio ad unum***

Finally, we have reached the main topic, or to say it better, the main thesis of my talk: epistemological solipsism. Before I finally explain it in some details, let me immediately remark that I am not endorsing any form of *ontological solipsism*. The latter form of solipsism has efficaciously been stigmatised by Bradley as follows:

“I cannot transcend my experience, and experience is my experience. From this it follows that nothing beyond myself exists”. (Bradley 1898)

Since here I am limiting myself to an “epistemological” point of view, I do not intend to tackle such a possible thesis – even if I believe that there are good arguments against it.

Perhaps, for the purposes of an epistemological reflection, we could try to rephrase Bradley's statement as follows and call it Absolutist Epistemological Solipsism:

(AES) = I cannot transcend my experience, and experience is my experience<sup>3</sup>. From this it follows that nothing beyond myself has experience.

Similarly to the case of ontological solipsism stigmatized by Bradley, also AES does clearly not hold. Or, at least, it is very ambiguous. AES would hold only if I assumed that *all* experience is my experience. I have no evidence for this, though. The very same idea that I cannot transcend my experience prevents me from being able to state it. Moreover, even if knowing is certainly an experience, it does not follow that there is only my experience, nor following knowledge. AES fundamentally sustain that there is knowledge only for one subject, but what ES2 requires is only that

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3 This assumption has actually been criticized by various philosophers. I believe that, even if some of such critiques are meaningful, the idea that the conscious and to some extent reflective experience which is a basic element of knowledge cannot but be thought in terms of individuality.

each subject has a limited realm of knowledge and that it can be sure only of her/his knowledge. I would therefore suggest to express the version of epistemological solipsism I believe to be true as follows: Knowledge is experience, and experience is always of *one* subject. It cannot be shared among different subjects. Therefore each subject has knowledge only inside of the limits of his/her experience. There is no knowledge concerning other's experiences and the knowledge owned by other subjects cannot be a matter of knowledge.

To understand better what I mean, we have now to clarify what we have so far repeatedly stated as one of the main and necessary "ingredients" of knowledge, that is the subject. So, let us now see what a subject is.

Outgoing from (my interpretation of) Husserl's (early) philosophy, I assume that a subject is nothing else and nothing more than a stream of experiences (notoriously, Husserl himself uses the Humean expression of *Buendel von Erlebnissen*). In this sense, a subject is a whole of various, more or less directly intertwined experiences:

$$\text{subject} = \text{exp}_1, \text{exp}_2, \text{exp}_3, \dots, \text{exp}_n$$

Some of the experiences the subject consists in are *intentional* experiences. This means that they have a reference to something which goes beyond experience. An intentional experience is made of three main elements:

$$\text{exp}^{\text{int}} = \text{hyle}, \text{noesis}, \text{noema}$$

This kind of experience is the one which is relevant when it comes to knowledge. According to the definition of knowledge I have endorsed here, in fact, knowledge is something which is achieved when the noema (= act-matter) of two distinct acts overlap. I have also stressed that both acts which permit knowledge must be entailed in one single subject. Such a "cognitive subject" is, following, made of intentional acts, included all their various parts, and some purely non intentional experiences, that is *hyletic moments* which do not participate into any intentional act.

$$\text{subj}^{\text{cog}} = (\text{h}, \text{ns}, \text{nm})_1, (\text{h}, \text{ns}, \text{nm})_2, (\text{h}, \text{ns}, \text{nm})_3, \dots, (\text{h}, \text{ns}, \text{nm})_n, \text{h}_i, \text{h}_{ii}, \text{h}_{iii}, \dots, \text{h}_n$$

$$\text{subj}^{\text{reell}} = \text{reelle Momente of a stream of experience}$$

$$\text{subj}^{\text{reell}} = \text{reelle Momente of exp}^{-\text{int}} + \text{reelle Momente of exp}^{\text{int}}$$

I think that now all the elements which motivate and support the thesis of the solipsismness of knowledge are at hand. Before we can finally perform a thorough grasping insight of such a reason, it is appropriate to get rid of some possible wrong inferences which could be drawn from what we have been seeing so far.

First of all, I must stress that to conceive the content of knowledge as a part of the subject, in as much as the subject is identified with a stream of experience, does not necessarily entail an "internalisation" of the world into the subject. This concerns the problem of transcendence, which I will partially analyse in the next paragraph. For the moment it can suffice to stress that in the conception of experience endorsed in this paper the distinction between a subjectual and an objectual side of experience (and therefore knowledge) is preserved, and that this is all what counts in order to prevent a reduction of all knowledge to self-knowledge. This last hypothesis would hold only if we let collapse onto each other all hyletic and noematic parts of experience. This is, I think, far from being necessary, though.<sup>4</sup>

A look at the current debate in (analytic) epistemology can help us to better sharpen the position I am trying to

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4 Even if we endorsed the "monadic hypothesis", as it can be found in some Husserlian texts, and according to which the noema is conceived as something internal to the subject, there would remain a difference between noema and thing, which is not a noema, but the *integral* of various noema. The monadic hypothesis does therefore not exclude that the other noema can be "possess" of other monads. For some considerations on the theme of monadic conception of subjectivity in Husserl's thought, see. Altobrando 2010, 2011, 2014.



outline here. To conceive knowledge in terms of subjectivism, and moreover of solipsism, could suggest that I am endorsing an internalist view of justification. This is only partially true.

One current definition of *Accessibility Knowledge Internalism* is:

AKI = one knows some proposition  $p$  only if one can become aware by reflection of one's knowledge basis for  $p$

I would retort to a possible conflation of ES2 with AKI that, if we endorse ES2, we could solely say that by reflection we *may* become aware why we believe that  $p$  is true, but in no case that  $p$  is true.

In a Husserlian frameworks, justifiers are intuitions. To be more precise: *the contents of intuitions*. One could say that belief are *leere Intentionen*, while justifications are *erfüllende Intuitionen*. However, it must be stressed that it is what make a intuition "full", i.e. its content, that really grounds our knowledge, not the intuition as such. The justifier of a belief is the content of an (intuitive) experience. The intuition itself is grounded in its content.

According to the correspondence theory of truth I endorse here, there is knowledge when the coincidence of two act-matters is observed, and one of the two acts is intuitive. To see the coincidence between two act-matters does not mean to reflect, anyway. What reflection permits us to see are rather the limits of knowledge. In the following paragraphs I will briefly outline some aspects of the experience of transcendence, both of "objects" and of "subjects", which permit us to better sharpen these limits.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Objectual Transcendence and Objectivity

According to the definition of knowledge I have assumed, if I cannot experience something, I cannot know it, too. With that said, experience itself urges me to acknowledge that there are aspects of the world I cannot experience (e.g. the other side of the desk or of the monitor in this exact moment). In a certain sense, I should say that I can grasp their existence (their *thatness*), but not how they "really" are (their *howness*). Just as their thatness is related to some kind of intuitive givenness, it is not simply imagined nor inferred. Following, it can also be considered as something I have evidence of and, following, that I *know*.

The effective knowledge of spatial objects is therefore linked with an awareness of their transcendence and this

5 Another blunder we have to evade consists in the "Kantian", "Idealist" or "Conceptualist" understanding of the so far considered subjectivism. Broadly speaking, we can say that such types of theories sustain that the content of knowledge derive their structure from the intellectual part of experience. We must for this purpose distinguish between the "intellectual" part and the "sensitive" part of experience – and therefore of subjectivity. We can outline the situation as follows:

Intellectual Subject (or Intellectual Part of a Subject) =  $\text{Subj}^I$

Sensitive Subject (or Sensitive Part of a Subject) =  $\text{Subj}^S$

Cognitive Subject (or the Subject in/for whom there is knowledge) =  $\text{Subj}^C$

If we, moreover, stress that in knowledge is necessarily contained an intuitive act, and if we, for the sake of brevity, limit our considerations to the knowledge of the perceptual world, we can say that:

$\text{Subj}^C = \text{Subj}^I \cap \text{Subj}^S$

We have now to point out that the endorsement of epistemological subjectivism does not involve that  $\text{Subj}^I$  determines  $\text{Subj}^S$ , nor that intellectual experiences or components of experiences determine sensible and/or intuitive contents of knowledge. Quite on the contrary, if we keep faithful to Husserlian phenomenological thought, we should state that it is the structure of sensible contents which permits the constitution of conceptual frames. Anyway, this is another question, which goes beyond the interests of this paper. It can here suffice to underline that a subjectivistic and solipsistic conception of knowledge does not per se entail such "conceptualist" or "intellectualist" forms of Idealism.

Indeed, such forms of Idealism seem to entail not simply an epistemological, but also an ontological thesis.

Even if there could be some good reasons to endorse this ontological thesis, this does not follow from epistemological subjectivism as such.

Moreover, I have to notice that I do not see any (sufficient nor necessary) reason to make a distinction between the real objects and the system of experiences which has a identical "noematic core". Otherwise we would have a *Ding an sich*.

awareness is what offers us the basis for a reflective knowledge of my cognitive limits. In fact, to perceive something as transcendence means to understand something as irreducible to a complete grasp and as exposed to incessant further grasps, as well as to indefinite other different and simultaneous grasps.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that something presents itself as being “in the outer world” allows me to know that such something is in a world which is in principle accessible to other subjects. Transcendence is given as such and it is a condition of possibility for objectivity. Transcendence is, in fact, the first “how” of a thing given to us as different from us. The intuitive grasp of such a thing concerns both a part of the thing itself and its irreducibility to the grasp which shows it. The further determination of the thing is, however, a matter of objectivity. Inasmuch as it transcends my intuition, it transcends my knowledge. Or, at least, it corresponds to another type of knowledge than the one I am discussing here.

Therefore, we should affirm that objectivity goes beyond the borders of strong and strict knowability, because it refers to an “integral” which can never be fully and adequately perceived by any singular subject. This does not mean that objectual transcendence is related to a *Ding an sich*, but rather that our comprehension of it cannot be reduced to our possibility to know it. This is another remarkable aspect of our cognitive limits that the clarification of our epistemically solipsistic condition can make us aware of.

#### **4. Subjectual Transcendence and Inaccessibility**

There are contents, like physical objects I have just considered, which are for each subject in each moment only partially accessible, and this equals more or less to say that they are such *per accidens*. We can never be sure about how something is, but it does not sound impossible that I could perceive the other aspects of the same thing just now. There are other contents which are *per essentiam* inaccessible to more than one subject, independently from time and space. There are “things” or “facts” which are not accessible to everyone, but only to one singular someone. The fact that something is accessible to everyone or not does not depend on its being the correlate of an intention, but on its own “position” in the realm of being and experience.

Also in the perspective I am proposing here, I would agree with Ryle that knowledge does not happen in the “mental theatre” of a subject. This does not imply that I have to deny that fully adequate evidence is never possible for outer objects. I would rather say that also the knowledge each subject has of itself is also “objectifying”, and that, following, the knowledge each subject has of itself is also inadequate. However, this does not imply that there are only outer objects and that there are no internal states.<sup>7</sup>

Seemingly, for certain kinds of objects one is the only one who can know about both their existence and their howness/whatness – these two “features” being probably coincident in the case of sensations. Sensations in general are neither questionable nor fallible – if not, to a certain extent, for their individuation – because their being experienced *as so* or *so is* their being *so* or *so*. They cannot change quality without being something else. Their principle of identity corresponds to their being a quality. A not felt quality is a kind of oxymoron. The epistemic problem about sensation consists, I would argue, in the possibility to be precisely and adequately able to cognitively grasp, and not simply to live/feel, them. Cognition, indeed, as we have seen, requires a certain distinction between belief and intuition. In the moment of certain sensations it does not seem to be so easy to be both intend the sensation, categorize it and see the coincidence between the two act-matters. With that said, sensations remain

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6 For this reason, what is transcendent cannot really ever be my “private” and exclusive property. For exactly this reason can be made my private property by a certain administration/government of space: private property is, in this view, a classification pertaining *per essentiam* to the “common world”.

7 We must acknowledge that about one's existence one has no possibility to distinguish between illusion and reality.

something certain and something which each subject quite perfectly know to be the only one to feel it.

So, strictly speaking in the mind there is no theatre. There are mental states, though. Some mental states and some of their parts are not ostensible. They constitute a private theatre in the sense that they cannot be put onto the "world's stage". In this sense, expressions are probably all there is to know about sorrow or happiness, pain and pleasure. I do not intend to question this specific issue here. At any rate, pain cannot be reduced to its expression or to the behaviour which (is supposed to) correspond to it.

Therefore, if we admit a plurality of subjects, we also have to acknowledge that they are not a matter of objective knowledge. When we pose other subjects, we pose a sphere of inaccessibility, inasmuch we pose *reelle Momente* different from ours. Indeed, to pose a subject means to pose a stream of experiences. But streams of experiences necessarily entail hyletic datas. And hyletic datas, constituting the "matter" itself a stream of consciousness is basically made of, cannot be shared by different subjects, *and* they cannot appear in the "outer" or "common" world. I do not "see" others' hyletic datas, even if I see others.

Here solipsism reigns. *Each one is alone with its own hyletic datas*. But we should also not forget that these hyletic datas are our "stuff": we are basically made of them. Moreover, hyletic datas are what allows us to "get in touch" with others.

From this it follows that we have two options: a. either I negate that there are other subjects; or b. I negate that other subjects can be known, but they nevertheless correspond to a specific type of experience and of "objects".

I do not intend to tackle the question of "other minds", here. I would just like to remark that epistemological solipsism does not entail, as I already said, ontological solipsism. Epistemological solipsism rather makes us better aware of the fact that other subjects are not a matter of knowledge and that intersubjective intercourses are mostly made of other forms of "understanding", and not of knowledge. Epistemological solipsism does not mean ontological nor existential isolation. Communication and even "direct" intersubjective intercourses are possible. But they are not, strictly speaking, acts of knowledge.

Even so, in order to admit "mental lives" which are irreducible to the "outer world", we do not need to create a "second world", or to ontologically separate mental and physical life. We have only to acknowledge that there are "things" which are closed or shut, in the sense of "inaccessible", to the view or, better, to the experience – and following to the knowledge – of others. They cannot be indicated, even not to ourselves. They can only be felt and, for this reason, the possibility to *know* them is essentially reserved to the person who has such a feeling. Also empathy cannot overcome the difference between me and the others. Someone else's pleasure cannot get known by me – even if someone can be experienced as having pleasure. In any case, empathy is not knowledge and a knowledge based on empathy is not, strictly speaking, the knowledge of the sensations of the "empathised" person.

In general, we can say that the separation between different subjects implies the impossibility to directly verify the silent thinking and the imagining of the others and, therefore, also the knowledge other subjects have. This, anyway, does not mean that what is known by others is knowable only by them – nor the opposite. Whether something is "objectively" knowable or not does not depend on its being given to one or more subjects. It is rather the nature of something which makes it intersubjectively accessible or not.

In this sense, I cannot demand nor expect to *know* the life of the others. I can only *understand* or *comprehend* it, while the pretension to "know" it, being inadequate to the "thing itself", is not only an inappropriately desperate enterprise, but it can also not but end up being unhealthy. This is possibly true also for the relationship one has with oneself.

With this, we can finally come to some recapitulative conclusions.

##### **5. Why solipsism is to be acknowledged and why its acknowledgement is good**

By means of a reflection on the ego-centric predicament and its specific experiential grounds, we have realised that 1) epistemic subjectivism is not so trivial, and that 2) it should be more properly regarded in terms of solipsism. By realising the unavoidable solipsismness of “strict” knowledge, one becomes aware of one’s own limits – limits which cannot be overcome in any way. However, to realise this “situation”, that is the limits of knowledge, permits the achievement of a form of apodictic and universally valid knowledge. It concerns a truth which touches upon the limits of knowledge itself, i.e. the “reflective” knowledge about the limits of our knowledge and the difference between what is experienced and what is known, as well as between what is knowable and what is experienceable. If reflective knowledge can be considered knowledge (and I see no reason to deny this), then we can say that in reflection we achieve to know the structure of experience and of knowable things themselves. In reflection I achieve a knowledge of second order, that concerns the structures of the things themselves in their relation to experience and knowledge. These structures, however, are not limited to my experience and knowledge of them. The structures I discover in this way are the structures of the experienced and known world itself, and they do not depend on something the world gains by its coming into contact with me. The structures I reveal are not simply the structures of “my” experience. Therefore, the structure I reveal by means of this reflection and the structure of the world coincide. Consequently, this reflective judgement is also a determining judgement. The structure I have discovered is constitutive of the world *as such*, and not simply as it simply seems to be. Reality (as an *experienced* whole) is:

- plural
- open
- epistemically indeterminate and indeterminable

Although I have been able to realize these truths endorsing a solipsistic stance, these characteristics of reality present themselves as absolute truths, which should be acknowledged by any possible subject inasmuch it can be both critically and sincerely considered both by me and by any other subject not simply as rational in the sense of able of logical thinking, but also in the sense of potentially reliable source of teaching about the world and companion in the understanding of the latter.