

Ernst Mach on the Self:

The Deconstruction of the Ego as an Attempt to avoid Solipsism

Dr. Markus Schrenk

DFG Project Explanation and Causation
Philosophisches Seminar
Universität zu Köln Richard-Strauss-Straße 2
50931 Köln, Germany

markus.schrenk@uni-koeln.de
www.clde.uni-koeln.de/schrenk

Abstract.

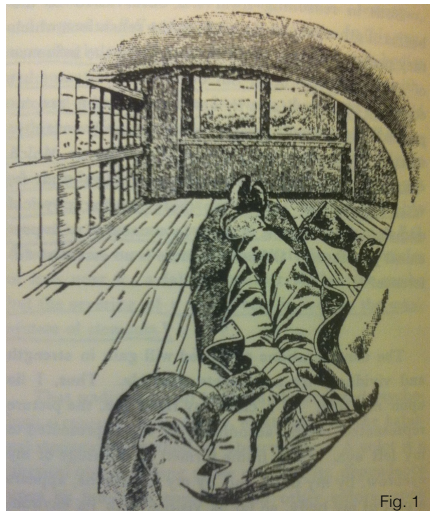
In his *Contributions to the Analysis of the Sensations* (Mach 1885) the phenomenalist philosopher Ernst Mach confronts us with a difficulty: “If we regard the Ego as a real unity, we become involved in the following dilemma: either we must set over against the Ego a world of unknowable entities [...] or we must regard the whole world, the Egos of other people included, as comprised in our own Ego.” (Mach 1885: 21)

In other words, if we start from a phenomenalist viewpoint, i.e., if we believe that the manifold of sensations we are confronted with is fundamental—as “For us, colors, times,... are the elements” (Mach 1885: 23)—then we are in danger to end up in solipsism. Unless, that is, we assume something-in-itself which matter, we others emanate.

The only other alternative Mach advertises denies any “something-in-itself” (Mach

and Mach advertises denies any “something-in-itself” (Mach 1885: 6)¹—that we get rid of the Ego. For, if there is no Self in the first place, then the question whether there are others dissolves. To put it the other way round, it is ok that the others do not exist because, really, I do not exist either. If the Ego is a Myth solipsism is not just wrong but nonsense.

There are two questions this paper wishes to address: first, do we need independent additional support for the denial of the Self or is the avoidance of solipsism reason enough to assume the Ego's non-existence? I will argue that we do need additional reasons and I will evaluate those that Mach indeed gives to prove that “the primary fact is not the I, the Ego, but the elements (sensations)” (Mach 1885: 19). Second, is the deconstruction of the I, even if further sufficient support can be found, really adequate to stop us from worrying about solipsism? The doubt I will put forward is that the illusion of a Self might conjure up enough of an Ego—just like feeling a pain is having a pain, even if it is located in a phantom limb—to start us wondering whether it also occurs elsewhere.



sensations we are ontologically Mach clearly does: sounds, spaces, ultimate elements—then we are in solipsism. Unless, that some underlying substratum from ourselves, and all the

native seems to be—it vehemently for heinous notion of a 1885: 6)¹—that we

¹ Needless to say, there are no souls or transcendental egos either.

Fig 1.: Illustrations from Mach's *Contributions to the Analysis of the Sensations*; apparently drawn by himself.

(1) What is and how do we end up with a thesis like Solipsism?

Solipsism is the doctrine, or, rather, the fear that only oneself exists. More precisely, for one might sadly be the only survivor of a nuclear war, a solipsist believes that everything is construed by him or her as part of the content of his or her consciousness.

Solipsism often goes hand in hand with external world scepticism but it does not have to. In fact, all of the four following combinations of two affirmations and two rejections are possible: What we ordinarily believe is, I suppose, (1.1) that there is a mind independent external world and that there are also other minds, thus rejecting both external world and other minds scepticism. Bishop Berkeley thought (1.2) that there is no external world (or only one imagined by god), yet, he did not doubt the existence of other minds. The reverse is also possible, while, to my knowledge, never defended: (1.3) the world, including other bodies, but no other minds exist (this would be a world full of what has become known as “Zombies” within analytic philosophy of mind). Last but not least, we might believe (1.4) that there is neither an external world nor that there are other minds. This is the extreme combination—external world scepticism plus solipsism—I will be concerned with here.²

Further focussing on the epistemological side of things we see that the problem of solipsism emerges easily as a consequence of epistemic theories cum theories of perception that start with the assumption that the immediate objects of our experiences are sense impressions (sense data, ideas, percepts, and the like) and that the objects of the external world, including other persons, are at best mediate (if not inexistent). Arguments from hallucination, dreams, evil daemons, brains in vats, matrices, etc. attest to these confined epistemologies to which, for example, many empiricists, phenomenologists, phenomenologists subscribe in one form or another.

(2) What can we do? Four orthodox answers.

Before I go into some detail of one such theory, Ernst Mach's phenomenalism, I first briefly sketch four known answers (or types of answer) to the solipsist.

(2.1) God to the Rescue.

As mentioned already, Bishop Berkeley thought the world exists in god's imagination and all other minds participate in this divine resource. While Berkeley's move is not directly countering solipsism but rather the fear of the in-existence of the external world it is granted that if an extra mental world is somehow secured, and should it only be in some transcendent being's mind, then solipsism is less of a threat: if god accounts already for something external why should he not be so kind to also create other minds?

Being methodologically agnostic as philosophers (if not proper atheists), we must, however, dismiss Berkeley's and other religious answers to solipsism. Unless, of course, we come to believe that solipsism/scepticism can only be solved by a leap of faith, i.e., only if we are forced to derive the existence of god from the otherwise irresolvable problem of solipsism. Yet, for my part, I would not want to cross that bridge until we should come to it.

² In fact, I will deal with the worst ontological form of it, for we might further distinguish the above metaphysical theses from (weaker) corresponding epistemic forms that formulate (1.2) - (1.4) only as contrived epistemic possibilities: for all we know (because all we know for certain is the content of our consciousness) (1.2) - (1.4) might be true, yet, fortunately, they really aren't for it's (ontologically) agreed that (1.1) is correct.

(2.2) Analogical Inference, Theoretical Entities, Behaviourism.

Analogical Inference. In similar circumstances, other human bodies with the same physico-chemical composition behave like my body. So, I might conclude that they have a mind just like I do.³

Theoretical Entities. Like other (scientific) theoretical entities, the stipulation of other minds is a useful tool for predictions of other bodies' behaviour. I.e., other minds are the best explanation of other bodies' trajectories through space and time and, so, we may postulate their existence.

Behaviourism. Adopt behaviourism as your theory of mind then there is no special problem to have access to other minds, for all there is to know about minds is anyway only their behavioural dispositions which manifest themselves in bodily movements (including, if you wish, the noises these bodies make with their tongues).

These three similar solutions are, of course, only possible if you have already taken the existence of the external world for granted. In other words, they are answers to (or rejections of) the zombie-world as depicted in (1.3). Since this paper focuses on type-(1.4) solipsism, where also the external world is in peril, (2.2) cannot be a solution, at least not on its own.

(2.3) Eliminativism Materialism.

Likewise with eliminative materialism:⁴ sure, if there are no minds at all then the problem of other minds seems not to arise a fortiori. Yet, again, eliminative materialism presupposes, just like the answers given in (2.2), the existence of the external world and is thus, not a solution to our problem unless we supplement a proof that the external world exists. (Be that as it may, eliminative materialism foreshadows an aspect of the solution to solipsism Ernst Mach favours and which will later be the main focus of this paper.)

(2.4) Others first.

One further line of argument against other-minds-scepticism argues that to think of certain mental states as mine is, in the first place, to discriminate them from mental states that are not mine, and these latter are, by definition, the mental states of others. One way to argue for a position like this centres on language and says that language is essentially a public phenomenon. Very crudely put, the assumptions needed to start the sceptical/solipsistic argument are, if true, the very ones that make it false: to be able to entertain the thought that I am the only one or that there is no external world the concepts "world", "exists", "I", "external" have to be known, and yet, their acquisition and/or meaning depends on worldly and interpersonal interaction.⁵

³ Ayer, in his *Language, Truth, and Logic* (p.136) acknowledges in a separate subchapter (which appears in the extended table of contents, yet, not as headline in the main text) that his phenomenalism gives rise to the problem of solipsism. He tries to solve it via Analogical Inference.

⁴ As, for example, defended by Antonio Damasio (Damasio 1994).

⁵ Wittgenstein's private language argument can be utilized to argue that way as, for example, Peter Strawson partially does (cf. Strawson 1959). We find similar thoughts in Heidegger: Scepticism requires no refutation, since "Dasein" is necessarily "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger 1927: §12&13, §43).

There are probably other possible ways to refute the sceptic/solipsist. Completeness is not intended here. Rather, the brief list (2.1) - (2.4) shall serve as stage setting for the particular solipsism Ernst Mach (and other phenomenologists) encounter and for the peculiar solution he offers.

(3) A particularly tough type-(1.4) ontological solipsism and a peculiar solution.

Starting point for Ernst Mach's very own solipsistic problem is his austere phenomenology. In his *Contributions to the Analysis of the Sensations* (Mach 1885) Mach claims that the manifold of sensations we are confronted with are ontologically fundamental: "For us, colors, sounds, spaces, times,... are the ultimate elements" (Mach 1885: 23) He also lists "moods of mind, feelings, and volitions" (Mach 1885: 2).

(3.1) The threat of Solipsism.

On this thin basis Mach's fear is very real: "We [Phenomenologists] become involved in the following dilemma: either we must set over against the Ego a world of unknowable entities [...] or we must regard the whole world, the Egos of other people included, as comprised in our own Ego." (Mach 1885: 21) I.e., either we assume, after all and contra a pure phenomenology, that there is some underlying thing-in-itself-substratum from which matter, we ourselves, and all the others emanate. Or everything is necessarily construed by our Ego as part of the content of our consciousness.

Contra to the first rescue possibility, Mach vehemently denies any "monstrous notion of a thing-in-itself" (Mach 1885: 6)⁶ and, so, solipsism seems, for the Machian phenomenologist, unavoidable.

(3.2) Mach's own solution.

Mach's dilemma comes actually with a proviso: "If we regard the Ego as a real unity, ... we [Phenomenologists] become involved in the following dilemma..." (Mach 1885: 21). That is, if we could get rid of our own Ego (as real unity) solipsism would be no problem because, if there is no Self in the first place, then the question whether there are others dissolves. To put it the other way round, it is ok that the others do not exist because, really, I do not exist either.⁷

(3.3) How to get rid of the Ego.

We have to ask two (or three) questions:

(3.3.1) Is the avoidance of solipsism reason enough to assume the Ego's non-existence?

If not,

(3.3.2) How do we get rid of the Ego?

⁶ This is, by the way, opposed to what another radical empiricist says. Acknowledging Solipsism's threat, William James writes: "To me the decisive reason in favor of our minds meeting in some common object at least is that, unless I make that supposition, I have no motive for assuming that your mind exists at all." (William James "Is Radical Empiricism Solipsistic?" in 1912: 77)

⁷ Someone who is very much opposed to this project from the outset might claim that deconstructing the Ego to dissolve solipsism is like committing suicide in fear of death. Or, less ironically put, that Mach's solution might *dissolve* but not *solve* the problem of solipsism. (We might also jokingly remark that there is a certain danger of reverse-solipsism here: we might end up with a prove that the others exist but I don't.)

And, later,

(5) Which kind of getting rid is enough?

To (3.3.1). Would the avoidance of solipsism alone be a sufficient reason to assume the Ego's non-existence? I.e., is phenomenalism and the non-existence of the ego already—without further considerations—more believable than phenomenalism plus solipsism?⁸ I take the answer to be negative. We don't easily accept that we ourselves are inexistent. We need additional reasons to reject ourselves and Mach gives us some in order to prove that "the primary fact is not the I, the Ego, but the elements (sensations)" (Mach 1885: 19).

To (3.3.2). So, how, then, does Mach get rid of the Ego? Here is, first, how we can't dissolve Selves: we can't, for reasons given above go eliminativism's route (because there, other than in Mach's assumptions, the existence of a material mind-independent world is taken for granted). However, note aside that Mach (and many later logical empiricists)⁹ does subscribe to an essential part of eliminativistic arguments, namely that there are 1-1 mind-brain correlations. Mach is convinced of this correlation. Therefore, if it turns out that the brain has no Ego module (and some neuro-scientific outcomes point towards this possibility) then such an outcome would be some kind of corroboration for the no-ego thesis. However, although being confirmation, it can surly be no per se argument for the Machian because brains are objects in an external world the existence of which his setup cannot take for granted.

Here is, second, how we *can* start. We have, for the sake of the argument of this paper, accepted phenomenalism and the cautious epistemology that leads to it: colors, sounds, moods of mind, feelings, and volitions are the ultimate elements of our experience. In metaphysical words, we built on a radically slim ontological fundament which can now, because of its thinness, be helpful to support the no-ego thesis. Mach contends:

(3.3.2.1) The unity of our body is no argument for an Ego. The difference between our body and the rest of the external world—both conceived phenomenalistically, of course, as special sets of sensations—is only marginal: together body and world "constitute a single coherent mass only, in which, when any one element is disturbed, all is put in motion; except that a disturbance in [the sensations that constitute the body] has more extensive and profound action than in [the sensations that constitute the rest of the world]." (Mach 1885: 14)

(3.3.2.2) Instability of unity. "The Ego is not a definable, unalterable, sharply-bounded unity." (Mach 1885: 20, Fn. 1) and, moreover, the I is "only an ideal mental-economical unity" (Mach 1885: 20) Mach's argument is that "An isolated Ego does not exist just like an isolated object does not exist. Thing and Ego are provisional fictions of the same kind." (Mach 1906: §10, my translation)

To Mach's own we could add the standard Humean arguments of the non-encounterability of the self in experience: "Philosophers begin to be reconcil'd to the principle, that we have no idea of external substance, distinct from the ideas or particular qualities. This must pave the way for a like principle with regard to the mind, that we have no notion of it, distinct from the

⁸ In the light of Solipsism's threat, we could, of course, happily reject phenomenalism tout court (and with it adjacent epistemologies like phenomenology). This is a tempting possibility which I, however, wish to bracket here.

⁹ Cf. Carnap: "This [that there is simultaneously for every mental event a physiological event] will be presupposed in what follows." (Carnap 1928: §166)

particular perceptions.” (Hume 1737: 635, Appendix) Also Derek Parfit agrees: “Such awareness [of an ego/soul as ontological entity] cannot in fact be distinguished from our awareness of mere psychological continuity. Our appearance gives us no reason to believe in the existence of these entities.” (Parfit 1984: 224)

(3.3.2.3) Phenomenology of a dissolving Ego. Mach further reminds us that (a) in dreams the Ego splits or fades away (Mach 1885: 3-4, Fn 1, cf. also 1905: §16); (b) we have withering memories (Mach 1885: 4, Fn 1 cont.); (c) in pathological cases the Ego is fragmented (Mach 1885: 3).

(4) Evaluation of Mach's Arguments for a dissolving Ego.

In order to be able to evaluate Mach's arguments (3.3.2.1) - (3.3.2.1) an important distinction has to be made:

(OE) The Ego as ontological entity.

(FU) The Ego as functional unit.

This distinction has at its core an error Peter Hacker attributes to Descartes: “Descartes confused the unity of apperception with the perception of a unitary subject.” (Hacker 1972: 88) and what William James added as clarification to his rejection of an Ego: “It seems to me that the hour is ripe for it [the ego] to be openly and universally discarded. [...] Let me then immediately explain that I mean only to deny that the word stands for an entity, but to insist most emphatically that it does stand for a function.” (James 1912: 3)

Now, with respect to (OE), arguments (3.3.2.1) and (3.3.2.2) are quite convincing. They are, in fact, merely the application of what the phenomenalist has to say about “external objects” to the Ego: the idea of an Ego as an object—a soul, an unknowable thing-in-itself, a transcendental ego—is indeed untenable within the phenomenalist framework. If the loose and separate manifold of sensations is ontologically fundamental, an Ego, just like any thing else, can't be reified.

Yet, despite (3.3.2.1) and (3.3.2.2), the ego undeniably remains as functional unit (FU): “It is simply a fact that several experiences can be co-conscious, or be the objects of a single state of awareness.” (Parfit 1984: 250) and, so, solipsism might still be a threat.

Can argument (3.3.2.3) help us here? It says that potentially, and occasionally actually, even the functional unit dissolves (to a lesser or higher degree). Is this, then, enough for Solipsism to lose its bite? Probably not, for, also potentially and often actually, the Ego (as a function) is still very vividly present and we might well be tempted to ask whether there are other such Ego-functions, even if only temporarily. And, again, we might fear that there can't be within a phenomenalist setup and, thus, we might have again solipsistic anxieties.

Intermediary Summary. Mach's strategy in order to avoid solipsism within a phenomenalist framework is to deny the existence of one's own ego and, therefore, to be able to claim that it doesn't matter that the others do not exist for one does not exist either. We have just seen that while his arguments for the non-existence of the Ego as an ontological entity (OE) are convincing they are not forceful enough to also doubt the existence of an ego as a functional unit (FU). Is there a way to develop his arguments further and, thereby, also get rid of the functional unit?

(5) Which kind of getting rid is enough?

We might have two intuitions about the Ego as a functional unit:

Ego-Illusion: the Ego-function is like the Müller-Lyer Illusion—we cannot help but (phenomenally) have it although we (rationally) totally accept that it is an illusion.

Ego-Pain: the Ego-function is like a pain in a phantom limb—feeling it just is having it, even if there's no corresponding ontological entity.

Ego-Pain suggests therapy rather than argumentation and, without doubt, some forms of Ego disintegration caused by, for example, sleep, drugs, losing consciousness, meditational practice, etc. make it practically impossible to be bothered by solipsism. Yet, this is not so much because the ego is gone (although it might well be defunct) but, in the first place, because the ability to ask the question of solipsism is lost. Also, although contemplative exercises, such as Buddhist practices, might be most noble ways to let go of the Ego¹⁰ there'd be a major flaw in our argumentation if we were to suggest, here, to meditate: just like we can't accept Berkeley's god as answer to philosophical problems we can hardly recommend meditation as a solution to the solipsism problem. This would too obviously be bad philosophical methodology.

We might, therefore, conclude that if the ego is (like) a pain and only meditational exercises but no philosophical argument can help then Mach's attempt to philosophically and argumentatively dissolve Solipsism has failed.

If, however, our intuition about the ego function is Ego-Illusion then, I believe, we might, with additional help from one of the orthodox strategies (2.1) - (2.4) from above, rebut solipsism. In Carnap's *Logical Construction of the World*, where, with his own methodological solipsism, Carnap comes as close as it can get to Mach's phenomenalism, the constitution of the Ego comes as late as the constitution of other minds: "The expressions 'autopsychological basis' and 'methodological Solipsism' are not to be interpreted as if there were, from the start, a division between the 'ipse', the 'I', and other subjects [...] At the beginning, one can speak neither of other subjects nor of the I. Both are constituted, namely together, at a later stage." (Carnap 1928: §65: 87-88; my translation). "The Ego-reference is no primary feature of the basic elements, the given. That an experience is auto-referential starts to make sense only when we can speak of the experiences of the others..." (Carnap 1928: §65: 88-9; my translation)

Carnap is, thus, pairing a part of Mach (there's no Ego in the elementary perceptions and, therefore not to be reified as ontological entity) with the Wittgenstein/Strawson/etc. idea (cf.

¹⁰ However, it is very interesting to note that Mach as well as Parfit, who both have similar accounts of the Ego, praise Buddhism: "After I recognized that Kant's 'thing-in-itself' was nonsense, I also had to acknowledge that the 'unchanging ego' was also a deception. I can scarcely confess how happy I felt, on thus becoming free from every tormenting, foolish notion of personal immortality, and seeing myself introduced into the understanding of Buddhism, a good fortune which the European is rarely able to share." (Mach in an unpublished autobiographical note 1913)
"Is [this] truth depressing? Some may find so. But I find it liberating, and consoling. When I believed that my existence was a [sic] such a further fact, I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less. Other people are closer. [...] Thinking hard about these arguments removes the glass wall between me and others." (Parfit 1984: 281-2; an appendix quotes extensively from Buddhistic scripts)

2.4) that to speak of certain mental states as being mine is, in the first place, to discriminate them from mental states that are not mine, i.e., those of others.

(6) Conclusion

Taken together, Mach-Carnap can claim that the Ego-Illusion comes and goes with the illusion of others and not separately. Thus, solipsism might not be a problem for we are doubly and simultaneously wrong about our own and the existence of others.

Thus, in the end, we arrive at a weaker claim that is, however, still in a Machian spirit: it is not the case that no one exists but, less strong, that either everyone exists or no one does. Your existence stands and falls with mine.

Literature

- Ayer, Alfred Jules 1936 *Language, Truth, and Logic* London: Gollancz
- Carnap, Rudolf 1928 *Der logische Aufbau der Welt* 1928 Leipzig: Felix Meiner Verlag
- Damasio, Antonio 1994 *Descartes Error* New York: Gosset/Putnam
- Hacker, Peter 1972 *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein* Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Heidegger, Martin 1927/2001¹⁸ *Sein und Zeit* Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag
- Hume, David 1739-1740/1975 *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P.H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press
- James, William 1912 *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. New York: Longman Green & Co
- Mach, Ernst 1897 *Contributions to the Analysis of the Sensations* (Deutsch: Die Analyse der Empfindungen und das Verhältnis des Physischen zum Psychischen, (1886)) Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company
- Mach, Ernst 1906 *Erkenntnis und Irrtum* Leipzig: Verlag von Johann Ambrosius Barth
- Parfit, Derek 1984 *Reasons and Persons* Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Strawson, Peter 1959 *Individuals* London: Methuen