

The (Un)bearable Lightness of Being. The Cyrenaics on Residual Solipsism

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“Mine is the first and only world!”
Wittgenstein, Notebook, 2 Sept. 1916.

“[For the Cyrenaics] One cannot grasp the affection
of the neighbour, nor can his neighbour,
since he cannot feel the affection of that other person,”
Sextus Empiricus, M. 7.196.

1. Introduction

Solipsism is a doctrine that has had very few adherents. Yet, it does have a philosophical appeal that invites us to take it seriously. As Sami Pihlström (2020) has recently argued, there are many kinds of solipsism in philosophy: from metaphysical to epistemological, from logical to semantic (with the further dichotomy ‘strong/mild’ to introduce other

sub-classes to be included in the general taxonomy). At the same time, as far as the actual liveability of solipsism is concerned, we are all debtors to the arguments Rae Langton (2009) has offered to show that, when treating other persons as objects (as e.g., in sexual objectification and pornography), we do live solipsistic lives, however difficult it may be to motivate solipsism theoretically. Even if the theory of solipsism is difficult to be coherently formulated, the practice of solipsism is more widespread than we are inclined to think at a first sight.

To my knowledge, there has been so far no attempt in the scholarship to address the problem of solipsism in ancient philosophy. This is unexpected, given the evident vitality of the scholarship in this area. It is also surprising, since there is a group of ancient philosophers such as the Cyrenaics who seem, at least *prima facie*, to advance philosophical views where solipsism is either implied or easily accommodated into.¹ The aim of this paper is to assess the evidence on Cyrenaic solipsism and show how and why some views endorsed by the Cyrenaics appear to be committing them to solipsism. After evaluating the fascinating case for Cyrenaic solipsism, the paper shall deal with an (often) underestimated argument on language attributed to the Cyrenaics, whose logic – if I reconstruct it well – implies that after all the Cyrenaics cannot have endorsed a radical solipsism. Yet, by drawing an illuminating parallel with Wittgenstein’s argument on private language and inner sensations, a case is to be made for the Cyrenaics to have subscribed to a sort of ‘residual solipsism’, which in turn helps us to understand the notion of Cyrenaic privacy at a fuller extent.

2. Solipsism

One of the main things to be noted when talking of solipsism is that it is a label that covers many different views, with many of us adopting a rather monolithically shaped version of it, such as ‘I alone exist’.² For this reason, I shall be inevitably selective and provide some definitions on solipsism that I think are particularly apt for the Cyrenaics. Here is a quotation from Todd (1968: vii):

The solipsist does not deny that there are reasons for believing in the existence of the external world and the existence of other persons [...]. He is saying that one can admit all this and still not commit oneself ontologically to anything beyond the occurrence of one’s own sensations and certain principle governing them. Thus, while the modern solipsist would never deny the existence of the world, his hypothesis is that we can assert its existence just by talking ultima-

¹ Contra, see Tsouna (1998: 96–104). The Socratic and Hellenistic school of the Cyrenaics has been the object of great scholarly interest in the last twenty years. Tsouna (1998) is a pioneering study on Cyrenaic epistemology, while Lampe (2014) is an exploration into Cyrenaic ethics and its later reception. Zilioli (2014) is a general introduction to the philosophy of the Cyrenaics.

² Again, see Pihlstrom (2020) for a very rich and informed overview of the varieties of solipsism.

tely about our own sensations and making very complex assertions about them. His views is that we never have beliefs which commit us to anything more than this [...]. Instead of denying the existence of an irreducible physical world he tells us that we never believed in it anyway.

Here there is another quotation, from Rollins (Rollins 1967: 488):

[For the solipsist] Every claim concerning the existence or nonexistence of anything is grounded in experience and could not possibly extend beyond it. An existential claim which seemed to reach beyond experience could have no basis or reference; it would apparently be unintelligible and not strictly a claim at all. But experience is essentially immediate; in itself it is never mistaken [...] and it had by one person truly and is private to him. Hence, existential claims can never truly, and perhaps never with full intelligibility, claim more than the existence of the experiencing self and its states, and indeed perhaps never claim more than this as of the moment of experience.³

By relying on these two characterisation of solipsism, which are centred on the epistemological indispensability of one's own affections to make any existential claim about 'the world', I shall assess the plausibility of Cyrenaic solipsism.

3. Cyrenaic solipsism I: Colotes

On the interpretation I shall be sketching in the following sections, a case seems to be made for Cyrenaic solipsism. There are two major sources that point to Cyrenaic solipsism. The first main source is a passage from Plutarch's *Against Colotes*. In his attempt to show that all those philosophers who do not adhere to Epicurus' doctrines make life impossible to live, Colotes targets, among others, the Cyrenaics too. In reporting Colotes' views, Plutarch writes:

He (sc. Colotes) aims, I suspect, to refute the Cyrenaics first, and then the Academy of Arcesilaus. The latter school was of those who suspended judgement on everything; whereas the former, placing all affections and sense-impressions within themselves, thought that the evidence derived from them was not enough, as far as assertions on external objects are concerned. Distancing themselves from external objects, they shut themselves up within their affections as in a siege. In doing so, they adopted the locution 'it appears' but refused to say in addition that 'it is' with regard to external objects. This is the reason why – Colotes says –

³ It is worth noting that the sort of solipsism that is described in the two quotations is a combination of epistemological and existential/metaphysical views. Philstrom (2020: 24) labels this sort of solipsism as 'classical solipsism'. He writes: "If the metaphysical dimension of this doctrine (sc. classical solipsism) is emphasised, classical solipsism claims that my experiences exhaust reality; if the epistemological dimension is taken to be central, the claim is rather that I cannot know (certainly, at last), or even justifiably believe, that they don't."

the Cyrenaics cannot live or cope with things. In addition, he says (making fun of them), that ‘these men do not say that a man or a horse or a wall is, but that they themselves are being walled or horsed or manned (*toichousthai kai hippousthai kai anthrôpousthai*)’ (Plu. 1120c–d = SSR IV A 211).⁴

Plutarch comments on Colotes’ understanding of the Cyrenaics:

In the first place, Colotes uses these expressions maliciously, just as a professional denouncer would do. These consequences among others will follow without any doubt from the teachings of the Cyrenaics. He should however have presented their doctrine in the actual form in which those philosophers taught it. They say we are being sweetened and bittered and chilled and warmed and illuminated and darkened (*glukainesthai gar legousi kai pikrainesthai kai psuchesthai kai thermainesthai kai phôtizesthai kai skotizesthai*). Each of these affections has within itself its own evidence, which is intrinsic to it and unchallenged (*tôn pathôn toutôn hekastou tèn enargeian oikeian en hautôî kai aperispaston echontos*). But whether the honey is sweet or the young olive-shoot bitter or the hail chilly or the unmixed wine warm or the sun luminous or the night air dark is contested by many witnesses (wild and domesticated animals and humans too). Some in fact dislike honey, others like olive-shoots or are burned off by hail or are chilled by the wine or go blind in the sunlight and see well at night. When opinion stays close to the affection it therefore preserves its infallibility (*hothen emmenousa tois pathesin ê doxa diatêrei to anamart êton*). On the contrary, when it oversteps them and mixes up with judgements and statements about external objects, it often disturbs itself and makes a fight against other people, who receive from the same objects contrary affections and different sense-impressions (Plu. 1120e–f = SSR IV A 211).

Colotes accuses the Cyrenaics of making life impossible because of their sceptical epistemology. Plutarch laments that Colotes uses some expressions (that is, ‘to be horsed’, ‘manned’ or ‘walled’) as referred to the Cyrenaics in a malicious way, because (he warns) Colotes should have presented the Cyrenaic doctrine in the actual way they did. Yet, Plutarch highlights that the consequences Colotes emphasises do follow from the teachings of the Cyrenaics. In fact, as other sources tell us, the Cyrenaics used expressions such as ‘to be sweetened’, ‘chilled’, ‘warmed’ and so on to express the absolute, unquestionable legitimacy of one’s own pathê. When I see something as white, or when I taste something as sweet, or when I feel something as warm, instead of reverting to the traditional linguistic usage and saying, ‘This honey is sweet’, ‘The sun is warm’, ‘Your face is white’, by following the Cyrenaic neologism I should say: ‘I am being whitened’, ‘I am being warmed’, ‘I am being sweetened’.⁵

⁴ All translations are my own.

⁵ See e.g. S.E. M. 7.191–192; see below, section 6.

The main philosophical point in these neologisms is that no reference is ever made to those external objects that are supposed to be causing the pathos of ‘whiteness’, ‘sweetness’ and ‘warmth’ in us. This is the case, Colotes warns, because the Cyrenaics think that the sort of evidence we can derive from the way things appear to us is not enough, as far as legitimate assertions on external objects are concerned. In his comments Plutarch gives further explanation about Colotes’ remark by insisting that the second-order judgements we construe on the basis of how things appear to us preserve their infallibility when they stay close to the immediacy of affection. On the contrary, when we move from the immediacy of how things appear to us to judgements and statements about (the material identity of) external objects, we are immediately trapped in a battle of conflicting appearances that gives us no clue whatsoever on how things really are. Both Colotes and Plutarch are thus in agreement and are both right in identifying the kernel of Cyrenaic epistemology as the view that only (our) *pathê* are known to us and are epistemologically infallible, while the things that are supposed to cause those *pathê* in us are not.

If this is the case, the Cyrenaic individual is, indeed, the sort of solipsist that Todd and Rollins describe in the two quotations above. He claims that his experience (his affections, how he is affected) is never mistaken and is, indeed, private to him. The world out there perhaps exists, but it is something the Cyrenaic individual cannot have a real grip on. What can be claimed in the Cyrenaic world is that, as Rollins writes, “existential claims can never truly, and perhaps never with full intelligibility, claim more than the existence of the experiencing self and its states, and indeed perhaps never claim more than this as of the moment of experience.” On the basis of this interpretation, solipsism is thus the main reason for which Colotes thinks the Cyrenaics make life impossible, since it is solipsism that traps them into a sort of privacy, either epistemological or ontological, which prevents them from living a truly real life.

4. Cyrenaic solipsism II: Aristocles of Messene

While the Cyrenaics were fiercely criticised by the Epicurean Colotes, they also got a critical coverage by the peripatetic philosopher Aristocles of Messene. In an extant section of his *On Philosophy*, Aristocles rephrases Colotes’ charge that life is impossible for the Cyrenaics from an Aristotelian standpoint. Again, it is the kind of solipsism inherent to Cyrenaic doctrines that, according to Aristocles, makes life impossible to live. He writes:

Next would be those who say that affections alone are apprehensible (*mona ta pathê katalêpta*). This view was adopted by some of the philosophers from Cyrene. As if oppressed by a kind of torpor, they maintained that they knew nothing at all, unless someone standing beside them struck and pricked them. They said that, when burnt or cut, they knew that they were affected by something (*kaiomenoi gar elegon ê temnomenoi gnôrizein hoti paschoien*). But whether the thing which is burning them is fire, or that which cut them is iron, they could not tell (*pote-*

ron de to kaion eîê pur ê to temnon sidêros, ouk echein eipein (Eus. PE 14.19.1 = SSR IV A 218 = Chiesara F5).

What is striking here is that, after reaffirming the kernel of Cyrenaic epistemology, Aristocles uses an image to describe the approach the Cyrenaic individual has to the external world that is so reminiscent of the sort of detachment Colotes conveys with the image of the Siege. For Aristocles, the Cyrenaics claim to know nothing at all, not even that there are other people and an external world, unless someone struck or pricked them. What they do know is how they are being affected, that is, burnt or cut. But they cannot go beyond the limit of their own affections and tell that what is burning them is fire or that what is cutting them is iron. Again, the radical option about the external world seems to step in: the Cyrenaic individual is unaware of external objects as they are, since what he can know is how he is affected, not what affects him. The Cyrenaic individual lives in the world of his own affections and is thus incapable to escape its ontological limits because he does not have a clue about the actual existence of external objects. Not only is he in the position to elaborate on solipsism, but also lives his own solipsism by being isolated from the outside world in an uninterrupted torpor, until someone else pricks him.⁶

Aristocles brings out what he thinks are the absurdities arising from these Cyrenaic views:

Three things must necessarily exist at the same time: the affection itself (*to te pathos auto*), what causes it (*to poioun*), and what undergoes it (*to paschon*). The person who apprehends an affection must necessarily perceive also what undergoes it. It cannot be the case that, if someone is for example warm, one will know that one is being warmed without knowing whether it is himself or a neighbour, now or last year, in Athens or Egypt, someone alive or dead, a man or a stone. One will therefore know too what one is affected by, for people know one another and the roads, cities, the food they eat. Likewise, craftsmen know their tools, doctors and sailors infer by means of signs what will happen, and dogs discover the tracks of wild animals (Eus. PE 14.19.3–4 = no corresponding testimony in SSR = Chiesara F5).

Aristocles thus believes that if he adheres to his doctrines, the Cyrenaic individual will be unable to get a proper grasp of both poles of the perceptual process: either who is being affected or what is being affected by.⁷ Closed up in his solipsism, the Cyrenaic

⁶ On the Cyrenaics as being unaware of what is actually affecting them, see also *The Anonymous Commentary on Plato's Theaetetus*, col. 65.29–39 (expanding on *Tht.* 152b). For a detailed analysis of the passage, both in historical and philosophical terms, see Chiesara (2001: 136–142).

⁷ As Chiesara points out (Chiesara 2001: 139), Aristocles has surely in mind here a crucial section of Plato's *Theaetetus*, where some unnamed subtler thinkers are made to expound a very original theory of perception where both perceiving subjects and perceived objects are somehow dissolved into the evanescent dynamics of

individual does not have a clue about what is affected by (he is being warmed but he does not know whether it is a wind or a hairdryer that makes him feel warm). Conversely, if we follow closely Aristocles' argument, the Cyrenaic individual does not even know the actual, ontological identity of himself as the perceptual agent. This is the case – Aristocles argues – because not only does the external world become an elusive item in the perceptual process but also because by insisting on the absolute subjectivism of perceptual states, the Cyrenaics end up dissipating the ontological relevance of the subject. The Cyrenaic individual is one of the items of the material world, together with other (external) objects – so Aristocles may have argued. In other words, if solipsism is the view that Aristocles sees as arising from Cyrenaicism, he seems to be construing a case to make that solipsism as refuted by internal grounds.⁸

5. Internal touch

I am not going to discuss the legitimacy of Aristocles' criticism. More in general, I am not going to address how the Cyrenaics may have responded to the charges levelled against them, because the aim of this paper is to understand on what grounds we may think that the Cyrenaics endorsed solipsism, not what counterarguments they would have used to defend their solipsistic views from criticism. What I want to highlight is that both Colotes (with Plutarch) and Aristocles motivate their claims that the Cyrenaics made life impossible by insisting on the fact that their own doctrines confine the Cyrenaic individual into a solipsistic corner, while making the Cyrenaic individual the measure of his own world.

The point about the Cyrenaic individual being the criterion of truth and existence is brought forward by Cicero in two related passages from the *Academica*, which have often been duly underestimated:

What about touch, of that touch philosophers call interior (*interiorem*), of either pleasure or pain, in which the Cyrenaics believe that only there is the criterion of truth (*iudicium*), because it is perceived by means of the senses? (Cic. *Ac. Pr.* 2.7.20 = SSR IV A 209).

What about the Cyrenaics, by no means contemptible philosophers? They deny that anything can be perceived from the outside (*qui negant esse quicquam quod percipi possit extrinsecus*), while they do say to perceive only those things they experience by means of an internal touch (*ea sola percipere quae tactu intumo sentiant*), like pain and pleasure; they cannot know whose

temporary processes (*Th.* 156a–157c). On these thinkers as possibly expounding Cyrenaic views, see Zilioli (2013); contra, Tsouna (1998: 125–129). Rowe (2015) offers a via media between the two opposite positions.

⁸ For the less encompassing charge of apraxia as levelled against the Cyrenaics, see Zilioli (2016).

sound or colour something is, but to sense only to be affected in a certain way (Cic. *Ac. Pr.* 2.24.76 = SSR IV A 209).

Cicero is the only source to mention the interior touch in relation to the Cyrenaics. However elusive the concept of ‘*tactus intumus* or *interior*’ may be, it is clear from Cicero’s passages that the Cyrenaic individual is the ultimate measure of his own world in so long as he knows and acts on the sole basis of his affections. This is the case for both ‘ethical’ affections (of pleasure and pain) and for the larger class of ‘epistemological’ affections (of sounds, colours and so on). Sedley notes: “In Hellenistic philosophy, ‘internal touch’ emerges as a technical term for the sense that makes us *directly aware of changes going inside us*” (my emphasis).⁹ This being the case, each of us has his own internal touch that is responsible for the actual ways we are privately affected. Given the strict subjectivism the Cyrenaics grant to one’s perceptions and sensations, it looks as if we all live in different private worlds shaped by our internal touches, with no access to the inner world of others.

From different historical and philosophical perspectives, all the sources analysed thus far contribute to creating the image of the Cyrenaics as philosophers very much inclined to take solipsism as a view somehow inherent to their philosophy. On the ground of the case I have been constructing so far, the Cyrenaics can thus be taken as the true and real solipsists of the ancient (Western) world.

6. The commonality of language: Sextus on the Cyrenaics

This image is challenged by a long passage of Sextus Empiricus, which I shall give in full considering its importance:

[For the Cyrenaics] No criterion is common to human beings, common names are assigned to objects (*onomata de koina tithesthai tois chrêmasin*). (196) All in common in fact call something white or sweet (*leukon men gar ti kai glukou kalousi koinôs pantes*), but they do not have something common that is white or sweet (*koinon de ti leukon ê glukou ouk echousin*). Each human being is aware of his own private affection (*hekastos gar tou idiou pathous anti-lambanetai*). One cannot say, however, whether this affection occurs in oneself and in one’s neighbour from a white object (*to de ei touto to pathos apo leukou enginetai autôi kai tôi pelas*), since one cannot grasp the affection of the neighbour, nor can his neighbour, since he cannot feel the affection of that other person. (197) And since no affection is common to us all, it is hasty to declare that what appears to me a certain way appears the same way to my neighbour as well. Perhaps I am constituted so as to be whitened by the external object when it comes

⁹ Sedley (2018: 64). On internal touch in Cyrenaic thought, see also Tsouna (1998: 18–20; 44–45 and Zilioli (2014: 125–128).

into contact with my senses, while another person has the senses constructed so as to have been disposed differently. In any case, the phenomenon is absolutely not common to us all (*ou pantôs oun koinon esti to phainomenon hêmin*). (198) That we really are not all affected in the same way because of different dispositions of our senses is clear from the cases of people who suffer from jaundice or ophthalmia and from those who are in a natural condition. Just as the first group of persons are affected yellowly, the second redly and third whitely from the same thing, so it is also probable that those who are in a natural condition are not affected in the same way by the same things because of the different construction of their senses, but rather that the person with grey eyes is affected in one way, the one with blue eyes in another, and the one with black eyes in another yet different way. It follows that the names we assign to things are common (*hôte koina men hêmas onomata tithenai tois pragmasin*), but that we have private affections (*pathê de ge echein idia*) (S.E. M. 7.195–198 = SSR IV A 213).

This passage is important for two main reasons: for what it says and for what it does not say. I shall start from what it says. Sextus confirms the main tenets of Cyrenaic philosophy when he reports the usual Cyrenaic view that each of us is solely and uniquely aware of his own affections, without being able either to have access to the affection of others or to say that the object causing the affection is really as we perceive it. Again, the Cyrenaic individual is aware (in a solipsistic way) of what he feels, with no actual access to the real world out there or to the inner world of others. Yet, the Cyrenaic individual – and this is the main novelty that the passage introduces – shares with others ‘common names’: “common names are assigned to objects;” “names we assign to things are common” (see the beginning and end of Sextus’ passage).¹⁰

The fact that we have common names means that the Cyrenaic individual is not equipped with a private language to name his own affections.¹¹ The actual dichotomy the passage introduces is one between ‘common names’ and ‘private affections’, so that what is being highlighted is that, although we have private affections that are neither relatable to the actual way things are nor to the way other people perceive things, we are in the condition to call our private affections with common names. Remember that the Cyrenaics invented such neologisms as ‘I am being whitened’ or ‘I am being sweetened’. These expressions are “common names” for the Cyrenaics: we all learn to call something

¹⁰ There are some textual problems for the the things to which the onomata are supposed to apply in 7.195: ‘chrêmasin’ is adopted by Natorp and Mannebach, while Kayser has ‘pragmasin’ (thus duplicating 7.198), Bekker ‘krimasin’, Mutschmann and Giannantoni ‘synkrimasin’. As Tsouna has noted (1998: 106–107), all these terms can either refer to ‘external objects’ or to pathê. It is clear from the context of Sextus’ passage however that the main problem for the Cyrenaics is how common names can refer to private affections.

¹¹ As Todd says, the solipsist should coherently maintain that “everything which can ordinarily be said could, in theory, be said in a language which referred to one’s own sensations (i.e. a private language)” (Todd 1968: 24).

as ‘white’ or ‘sweet’ (or to be more accurate, we all learn how to use the expressions ‘to be sweetened or whitened’), although we do refer to different (private) affections.¹²

There is therefore something that is common in the Cyrenaic world: at least a public language exists! The Cyrenaic individual can still be in the position to defend his own solipsistic views because the fact that a common language is spoken does not exclude that the Cyrenaic individual is the only and actual measure of his world. If we refer back to the idea of living a solipsistic life (in contrast with the difficulty to motivate it theoretically) which I briefly introduced at the beginning of the paper, we can say that the Cyrenaic individual may well be in the position to live it, despite being forced to admit that a communal language is spoken.

Is this communal language simply spoken or is it to be spoken? That is, do we need a public language to be able to account for our own private affections? And with this question I turn to the second aspect of Sextus’ passage, that is, what it does not say. Sextus constructs an argument purported to show that despite being centred on an absolute and un-transferrable privacy, Cyrenaic epistemology admits of a public, shared language, to refer and name individual affections. But how is it so? How is it possible that the Cyrenaic individual can name his own private affections by means of a public language? Sextus does not say anything about this, and we are left wondering. Even the probable commitment to conventionalism on the part of the Cyrenaics does not help us on the matter. We may all agree to call something conventionally (as e.g., ‘chair’) but this does not tell us how we manage to do so as far as sensations and perceptions are concerned. For anyone familiar with contemporary philosophy, the need to bring in relevant discussions from Wittgenstein becomes inevitable. He is the philosopher who has so far managed to develop the most influential argument about public languages and inner sensations. What I thus propose at this point is to move onto a more speculative terrain, to assess how Wittgenstein’s treatment of the very same topics that we see as discussed in Sextus’ passage may further illuminate the problem of solipsism, either in itself or in connection with the Cyrenaics.

7. Wittgenstein’s Private Language argument: a Trojan horse for Cyrenaic solipsism?

Wittgenstein is perhaps the contemporary philosopher who flirted with solipsism more than any others, from the *Tractatus*, via *the Blue Book*, to the *Philosophical Investigations*.¹³ More perspicuously, his notorious argument about the impossibility of a private language to name private, inner sensations is to be read not only as his most sophisticated attempt to argue against the sort of solipsistic temptations he had felt so acutely since writing

¹² Tsouna has highlighted that the Cyrenaics could well belong to the lively conventionalist strand in the ancient philosophy of language: Tsouna (1998: 107).

¹³ On Wittgenstein’s solipsism, see Hacker (1972: 58–85; 185–214); Pears (1987: 153–190; 1988: Part III, chapters 11 and 12; 2008: 96–127); Philström (2020: 64–80; Dionigi (2001: 429–475).

the *Tractatus*, but also, and more relevantly here, as a stimulating comparison with the argument about private affections and common names that in the quoted passage Sextus develops in connection with the Cyrenaics.

The philosophical problems that Wittgenstein considers in the sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* devoted to discussing the (im)possibility of a private language are remarkably similar to a problem that the Cyrenaics may have well faced: how can one name his inner, private sensations? How can a person identify, re-identify, and name his sensations? Wittgenstein starts off by imagining a solipsistic case that, once again, can be the actual one the Cyrenaic individual may have well faced. Wittgenstein makes the example of a diarist who wants to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation:

To this end I associate it [the sensation] with the sign ‘S’ and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation [...]. I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation – and so, as it were, point to it inwardly. – but what is this ceremony for? For that is all it seems to be! A definition surely serves to establish the meaning of a sign. – Well, that is done precisely by the concentrating of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connexion between the sign and the sensation. – but “I impress it on myself” can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connexion right in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can’t talk about ‘right’ (PI, § 258).

The solipsistic diarist cannot name a sensation he has with a private ‘sign’ because this would put him in the condition of not being able to find out a correct criterion to re-identify that sensation. His private ‘sign’ for the sensation ‘S’ would not give it any plausible criterion of correctness. To understand, account for and name our sensations – Wittgenstein argues – we need to rely on objective, publicly shared criteria. Wittgenstein makes the example of a manometer that registers a rise of someone’s blood pressure when one has a particular sensation (PI, § 270). Or he refers to the case of someone who does not know whether he correctly remembers the departure time for a train. If this person recalls to his mind the mental image of the timetable he once looked at, this will not be enough because “the mental image of the time-table could not itself be tested for correctness” (PI, § 265). That person would need to look at the actual timetable, which is publicly checkable, to be sure of the correct departure time for his train.

While showing that it is impossible to create a private language for inner sensations because there would be no criteria of correctness available for the use of such a language, Wittgenstein also develops a view about the semantics of sensations that Ayer believes to be even more radical than Carnap’s crude verificationism. As Ayer (1966: 254) puts it: “He [Wittgenstein] seems to take the view that someone who attempted to use language in this private way would not merely be unable to communicate his meaning to others but would have no meaning to communicate even to himself; he would not succeed in saying anything at all.” This person would not only be unable to name his own sensa-

tions but also, and more essentially, he would be in the unpleasant position not to understand what kind of sensation he is dealing with. As Wittgenstein writes to make the point, “you learned the concept pain when you learned language” (PI, § 384).¹⁴ He insists that every concept we employ, including those related to sensations, is mediated through the communal language we use and the language-games we all play and share.¹⁵

There is a huge bibliography on Wittgenstein’s private language argument, which is undoubtedly one of the most famous arguments in contemporary philosophy.¹⁶ I do not have any pretence either to deal with the many philosophical issues the private language argument raises or to confront the extensive scholarship on it. Yet, for the purposes of this paper, Wittgenstein offers a powerful argument against solipsism when he argues that we all learn the names of our sensations and perceptions by means of a shared, common language and that it cannot really be otherwise. If we move back to the case of the Cyrenaics, it will have to be noted that Sextus’ passage insists on the commonality of language in relation to the privacy of individual affections, thus arguing that for the Cyrenaics we have private affections but common names (which we all use to refer to private affections).

There is no way for us to understand how the Cyrenaics motivated this view, but it is strikingly like the one Wittgenstein develops in the *Philosophical Investigations* to argue against a private language. For both the Cyrenaics and Wittgenstein, we have common names for our sensations and perceptions.¹⁷ Wittgenstein gives us compelling arguments to defend the view that it is impossible for us to understand and name our sensations privately (or in a solipsistic way). The Cyrenaics do not do that, but the insistence on the commonality of a shared language to name our sensations and perceptions cannot point if not in the same direction of Wittgenstein’s argument. It is only by relying on common names that we can make sense of our internal, private world of affections: this is the view that, I claim, can be ascribed to the Cyrenaics on the basis of Sextus’ passage.¹⁸

If this is the case, the commitment to solipsism on the part of the Cyrenaics will be seriously jeopardised. If all our private affections are mediated and informed by the language we all speak and the conceptual schemes inherent to it, this will entail that the privacy of one’s affections relies on other people having other private affections, equally

¹⁴ See also PI, § 244, 245, and, most meaningfully, § 261 and § 404.

¹⁵ See e.g., PI §§ 261–263.

¹⁶ The first port of call for the private language argument is McGinn (2013: 134–215, with further references). See also Dionigi (2001), chapter 8, which scrutinises a very large portion of secondary literature. A classical reading is, notoriously, Kripke (1984), which has sparked a great deal of debate.

¹⁷ It is worth noting that in his discussion of inner sensations Wittgenstein uses examples such as ‘pain’ and ‘red’ that actually belong to the same class of ethical and epistemological affections that the Cyrenaics themselves most consider see e.g., PI, §§ 244–246, 250–251, § 253, § 263, § 271 (on pain); §§ 273–275; § 278; §§ 284–289 (on perceptions of colours). On Wittgenstein on sensations, see also Wittgenstein (1993).

¹⁸ There are two famous cases allowing for private languages for inner sensations in philosophy: one is Descartes (Adam, Tannery 1897–1910: VII, 71; IV 573–574; Principles, I, LXVIII) and the other is Locke (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II.xxxii.15; III.ii.2–6; III.ix.4–14; III.x.26). Both cases suffer philosophical defeats in light of Wittgenstein’s arguments. This has been shown by Kenny for Descartes (Kenny 1966) and by Hacker for Locke (1972: 224–242). Ayer has tried to rebut Wittgenstein’s arguments on private languages, but he has too failed (Ayer 1966: see Rhees 1966 on Ayer’s argument).

valuable and legitimate. Despite insisting on the privacy of one's affections, the Cyrenaics must have been prepared to admit that the plurality of private affections different people have does pose a quite serious philosophical challenge for those philosophers like them claiming that there is an insuperable gulf between my perceptions and those of others. After all, despite having private affections, we all learn their grammar and how to understand them by relying on a public tool, namely our shared language.

If read along quite plausible interpretative lines as the ones suggested above, Sextus' argument on the commonality of language therefore seems to reduce the Cyrenaic commitment to solipsism in a drastic way. Yet, the case for Cyrenaic solipsism that I have been constructing in the previous sections of this paper still rests on a highly plausible reading of the extant evidence. How can we make sense of this clash? Again, a crucial distinction Wittgenstein introduces between the epistemological privacy and the privacy of the ownership will help to make the clash an apparent one, while also making a case for a sort of residual solipsism in Cyrenaic philosophy by spelling out more clearly what the Cyrenaics may have actually meant when they talked of 'private affections' (*pathê idia*).

8. Residual solipsism: the inalienable privacy of the ownership

When he deals with the privacy of sensations in the context of the private language argument, Wittgenstein makes a clear distinction between epistemological privacy and the privacy of the ownership:¹⁹ as Hacker writes, for Wittgenstein "something is epistemologically private for a person if only he can know it; it is private in the second sense [that is, privacy of the ownership] if, in principle only he can have it" (Hacker 1972: 231).²⁰ On the basis of this distinction, we understand that for Wittgenstein epistemological privacy is impossible while the privacy of the ownership is unalienable: I can well know that others are in pain while it does not make sense to say, 'I know I am in pain', since the conditions of knowledge/doubt do not hold for first-person statement about one's inner sensations. I cannot say: 'I have pain and I don't know it' and thus I cannot say: 'I have pain and I know it'. What I can say without any doubt is that I have a pain, namely, that the pain I feel is simply and only my own and cannot be someone else's.²¹

If we apply Wittgenstein's dichotomy about privacy (epistemological vs of the ownership) to the Cyrenaics, at first, we may be thinking that both privacies are legitimate for them. But this would be wrong. As we already know by now, the kernel of Cyrenaic epistemology is that only (private) affections are known to us. When they say that I cannot be mistaken that I am being whitened, the Cyrenaics must admit – one can argue – that I know that I am having an affection of white. Yet, what is being known for the Cyrenaics

¹⁹ See Hacker (1975: 222–226); Dionigi (2001: 435–440, with further references).

²⁰ See also Dionigi (2001: 448–452).

²¹ See, above all, § 246. See also §§ 253, 303, 404, 405, 408. Wittgenstein investigates the topic of knowledge/certainty at a fuller extent in *On Certainty*, on which see Coliva (2010) and Hamilton (2014).

is the actual affection we are having, not that we know that we are affected. To say that we know we are being whitened would be as pleonastic and redundant for the Cyrenaics as it would be senseless for Wittgenstein. The Cyrenaics may have been uninterested in the notion of epistemological privacy, at least in Wittgenstein's sense, but they surely endorsed the privacy of the ownership for affections. The Cyrenaics thought that I surely have and own my sensation of white or pain when I say: "I am being whitened" or "I feel pain." When they insist on the privacy of one's affections, what I claim the Cyrenaics are highlighting is that each of us possesses his own sensation and that we cannot have (any access whatsoever to) the sensations of others: I cannot have/feel your pain. As Sextus remarks: "[for the Cyrenaics] one cannot grasp the affection of the neighbour, nor can his neighbour, since he cannot feel the affection of that other person" (S.E. M. 7.196).

One may retort that there is an epistemological aspect involved in the insistence the Cyrenaics place on the privacy of affections, since they make clear that the actual ownership of a sensation brings with it the inescapable epistemological certainty about the infallibility of that sensation. For the Cyrenaics, I cannot be mistaken that I am being whitened; that is, in modern parlance, I cannot be mistaken that I see that object as white. The inalienability of the ownership of affections does not exclude, however, that an epistemological aspect is involved in the process. Quite the contrary, I suggest. When we claim that a sensation is inalienable, we may well mean that each of us has his own sensation (either of 'red' or 'pain') and that we cannot have the sensation of others. Accordingly, we cannot know whether the actual sensation we have is identical or different from the one someone else has. We cannot know where my sensation of red or pain is identical or different from yours. Following Wittgenstein (and, on the interpretation sketched in this paper, the Cyrenaics too), we can submit that you and I have learned how to name our sensations by means of a communal language, so that we have common names for private affections. Yet, you and I will never know whether the common names we use for our affections name identical or different sensations. As Wittgenstein writes: "The essential thing about private experience is really not that each person possesses his own exemplar, but that nobody knows whether other people also have this or something else. The assumption would thus be possible – though unverifiable – that one section of mankind had one sensation of red and another section another" (PI, § 272).

There is therefore a residual solipsism about private affections that rests on the inalienability of their ownership and that no communal language or shared semantic criteria can ever get rid of. We may have common names for private affections (as the Cyrenaics maintain, according to Sextus); we may well map our internal world of perceptions and sensations by means of a public language (as Wittgenstein argues). Yet, each of us has his own private sensations and perceptions. There really seems to be no way to assess whether we have different or the same ones, although we have common names to refer to them. Although we use common names and public languages, I cannot have any access to your own sensations, and you cannot feel mine. This fact contributes much to the idea that there is a subjective privacy that is at the core of whom we are. It is this privacy that contributes, in an essential way, to the actual constitution of our inner self. If we pair

such a privacy with the features of epistemological incorrigibility; if we discharge the material world of objects and other people as wholly elusive, we shall start to realize how innovative and original the Cyrenaics could have been. For the first time in Greek philosophy, they highlighted the importance of the subject as the locus of inner life, despite being ready to recognize that, at least on the interpretation I recommend, the subject lacked a deeper identity, ontologically stable over time (Zilioli 2014: ch. 5). They made that subject the fulcrum of their epistemological and ethical life, in contrast with a world of material objects whose essence they thought could never be grasped. They believed that each of us has his own, inalienable inner world, to which others cannot have any access despite common names and public languages. In doing so, the Cyrenaics were the kind of solipsist philosophers who Wittgenstein describes in the Blue Book and for whom I cannot see, hear, or feel what others see, hear, or feel (Wittgenstein 1958: 62–64).

Although they may have not endorsed the sort of encompassing solipsism that I have tried to ascribe to them in the initial sections of this paper, the residual solipsism that I identified in this last section is at the core of the originality that Cyrenaic philosophy has displayed over the centuries. Such residual solipsism is, I claim, what can motivate the main philosophical views around which the Cyrenaics built up their philosophy and their notion of inalienable privacy.²²

²² I first became seriously interested in ancient solipsism when I had an exchange of views with Jan Westerhoff, who is exploring the topic in ancient Indian philosophy. I thank him for having pushed my research into new directions with his insightful remarks. I am also grateful to an anonymous referee for the journal for her/his very helpful and encouraging remarks; to Mikolaj Domaradzki, the editor in chief, for his support; to Livio Rossetti for a variety of reasons that it would be too long to report here (I am sure he knows them well already). The research that has made this paper possible was carried out under the auspices of a Leverhulme Research Grant (RPG-2021-204). I thank the Trust for its generous support.

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The (Un)bearable Lightness of Being. The Cyrenaics on Residual Solipsism

The aim of this paper is to assess the evidence on Cyrenaic solipsism and show how and why some views endorsed by the Cyrenaics appear to be committing them to solipsism. After evaluating the fascinating case for Cyrenaic solipsism, the paper shall deal with an (often) underestimated argument on language attributed to the Cyrenaics, whose logic – if I reconstruct it well – implies that after all the Cyrenaics cannot have endorsed a radical solipsism. Yet, by drawing an illuminating parallel with Wittgenstein’s argument on private language and inner sensations, a case is to be made for the Cyrenaics to have subscribed to a sort of ‘residual solipsism’, which in turn helps us to understand the notion of Cyrenaic privacy at a fuller extent.

KEY WORDS

Cyrenaics, solipsism, privacy, Wittgenstein, Colotes, Aristocles, internal touch

