

## **SOLIPSISM IN SOCIAL INQUIRY: REVISITING A REDUNDANT PARADIGM**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to further animate the literature on management philosophy as regards the place of solipsism in social inquiry. The philosophical genealogy of solipsism was traced from the times of Gorgias of Leontini (483 BC – 375 BC) to the contemporary era of social research. The process of gaining knowledge concerning social reality and the resultant description about its nature has bifurcated social inquirers into two principal groups with separate paradigms, namely: the positivists and the interpretivists. For a longtime till now, reciprocal antipathy and fire works for supremacy have been observed between the two schools of social science research as regards their epistemological, ontological and methodological posturing; each accusing each other of nativity and bias in the estimation of truth and reality. The paper corroborates the fact that both camps are entrapped in the cave of solipsism. Thus, because solipsism is the extreme case of skepticism adopted by interpretivists to demonstrate their subjective consciousness in social inquiry, the paper contends that studies in the social sciences are purely behavioural in nature where the data are in the respondent's mind and produced in qualitative state, and so solipsism be adopted. This is deemed appropriate because doubt, an attendant critical realism, is necessary to improve the state of knowing in social inquiry.

**Keywords:** Solipsism, ontology, epistemology, social inquiry, social reality, social research, positivists, humanistic, realism, idealism.

### **Introduction**

Social inquiry, otherwise known as social science research, has gained unprecedented currency among scholars and seekers of truth (Musthafa, 2014). As the social environment becomes more complex and dynamic, researchers in the field keep articulating various methods of inquiry which they deem appropriate for the description and interpretation of reality. In a bid to finding explanations to the myriad of phenomena in the social world, researchers have raised various ontological and epistemological questions such as: of what nature and content is the social world? What steps do we take to know social reality? Responses to these questions and others have given rise to the multiplicity of approaches in to

social inquiry which fall under qualitative and quantitative typologies (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003; Norman, 2007).

Both the quantitative purists and qualitative protagonists of social inquiry have pointed accusing fingers at each other as regards the methodological, epistemological and ontological appropriateness of their approaches in describing and understanding reality (Thorne, et al, 1999).

The positivists employ the empiricism of natural sciences to explore the social world. They claim that their findings are replicable and provide more reliable and valid account of social phenomena than those of the interpretivists or constructionists. An extra claim they make is that empirically based inquiry creates an atmosphere that shields the observer from biases. For example, Jussim (2012) argues that, social perception about individual members of a group often reflect objective reality and that the evaluations of social phenomena requires testing their accuracy against empirical data.

On the other hand, the qualitative school believes that there is an interaction between the knower and the known in the process of finding the truth. In such instance, the researcher can only produce subjective interpretations of reality. Several other approaches were erected to reconcile the qualitative and quantitative schools of thought in social inquiry. These include pragmatism, pluralism or the mixed method (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

At the heart of the criticisms which the two major camps of social research fire at each other, is the problem of solipsism – a concept which many scholars have vehemently opposed but have not been able to dislodge owing to its characteristic ubiquity in all genres of social inquiry (Johnstone, 1999). In this paper, the attributes and gains of solipsism are cultivated which will serve as a platform for researchers to leverage their understanding in the course of defining the truth and estimating social reality.

### **Concept of Solipsism**

There are not many concepts that have received attention, repudiation, ambushment and frontal attacks in philosophical circles and corridors of social inquiry like solipsism (Smith, 1981; Bokil, 1996). The word solipsism is an etymological derivative of the latin words ‘solus’ meaning ‘alone’, and ‘ipse’, meaning ‘self’ – the self alone or the self on its own.

The earliest recording of solipsism is traceable to Gorgias of Leontini (C483BCE – 375BCE) as quoted in the works of Sextus Empiricus which states that:

(1) Nothing exists (2) Even if something exists, nothing can be known about it, and (3) Even if something could be known about it, knowledge about it cannot be communicated to others.

Thus, solipsism is an assertion that reality only exists in the self and there can never be an existence external to the self. Thornton (1995) succinctly puts it that “solipsism is therefore more properly regarded as the doctrine that, in principle, ‘existence’ means for me my existence and that of my mental states. Existence is everything that I experience-physical objects, other people, events and processes...” In this sense, the individual mind is the primary source of knowledge and nothing exists in the world unless one is aware of it (Johnstone, 1999; Russell, 1914).

There are three major variants of solipsism, namely: (i) Metaphysical Solipsism, (2) Epistemological Solipsism and (3) Methodological Solipsism (Kremer, 2004; Smith, 1981).

Metaphysical Solipsism views the individual as the only source of reality whereby the external world, or people or objects have no existence of their own.

Epistemological Solipsism maintains that only the mental state of the observer is the true approximation of reality, and the external world need not to be contemplated upon because it does not exist even in the first instance, while Methodological Solipsism puts forward that the individual self and mental processes are the only launching pads of reality, and that nothing can exist beyond the consciousness (Fordor, 1980). Methodological Solipsism as it is currently used as an offshoot of the philosophical constructions of Putnam (1975), which he described as the position that, “no psychological state, properly so called, presupposes the existence of any other individual other than the subject to whom that state is ascribed”.

### **The Meaning and Nature of Social Inquiry**

Social inquiry or social research is the systematic investigation conducted by social scientists in order to find explanations to society’s attitudes, beliefs, classifications, values and perceptions (Ragin, 1994; Musthafa, 2014). It is a methodological process that involves the examination of social phenomena, ideas and constructions. Wood (2013) describes social research as the process of gathering information through interviews, questionnaires, observations and examination of issues of social significance. The goal of social inquiry is to arrive at valid and reliable or trust-worthy conclusions about phenomena through acceptable paradigms and methodologies.

Social reality can be explained and understood from different approaches, and so researchers lean on whatever approach they deem fit based on their philosophical biases. Thus, there have arisen the positivists versus the humanistic (interpretivists) divides among social researchers, subject to epistemological, ontological and methodological nuances.

### **Epistemological Tradition**

Epistemology is the theory which addresses how knowledge is created. It is concerned with the various aspects of learning and knowledge creation. Epistemology is viewed as normative or interpretative. The normative view suggests that knowledge is created on the platform of rational positivism, whereby the focus is on the methods of pure sciences (Bryman, 2001).

On the other hand, the interpretivists’ view holds that objective and subjective reference of social reality is intricately interwoven. This approach abhors equating human beings to mechanical contrivances as in the case of natural sciences. Subjective interpretation of reality is at the core of this school of thought (Porta and Keating, 2008). Knowledge is inferred through causality in the positivists’ camp, whereas the knowledge gained by the interpretivists is contextual in nature.

### **Ontological Stands in Social Inquiry**

Ontology is the science of being or existence. An ontological exercise questions the very existence of reality, whether reality is worth knowing, or if it exists separately from human biases. The two ontological divides in social inquiry are Realism and Idealism.

The realists believe that the observer is objective and reality exists independently of the researcher’s personal bias or perception, whereas the idealists submit that reality is socially constructed and is an offshoot of the perceptions of the mind.

### **Methodological Tradition**

The methodological tradition reveals the choice of instruments and strategies employed to acquire knowledge about social reality. Musthafa (2014) contended that, “the methodological assumptions focus on analysis of the methods used in gathering research data. In positivist paradigm, the scientific method (quantitative) is used to observe the phenomena under study. It uses numerical calculations to operationalize the finding and test the theory. On the other hand, the constructivist paradigm uses qualitative methods like observations, fieldwork notes, interviews, etc to investigate the phenomena”. In resonance with this submission, Corbetta (2003) averred that the approaches employed by the positivist is *hypotheco-deductive* which involves conceptual framework, methods of statistical computations, and procedures for observation, while Hay (2002) argued that the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm is carried out inquiry via inductive method, which requires drawing inferences and observations in numerous scenarios.

### **Solipsism: The Bone in the Throat of the Inquirer**

The audacity and arrogance of the theory of solipsism caught the attention of nearly all the seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophers, except David Hume (1711 – 1796), who considered it unqualified for the dissipation of his contemplative energies.

In line with this, most arguments have clearly revealed that the individuation of reality or the estimation of truth through the inner portals of the self to the exclusion of the external environment, as presented by the theory of solipsism, is a problem that has come to stay, even if it is unbelievable, stupid and cannot be demonstrably proven (Johansen, 1999; Schwartz, 2008).

A notable re-ignition of solipsism as an epistemological thesis was brought about by Rene Descartes (1641) who engaged in profound contemplation of the nature of things as encapsulated in his *cogito ergo sum* proposition – a philosophical dictum which posits that reality only exists in the mind of the observer.

By virtue of Descartes’ proposition of methodic doubt, it can thus be inferred that the results, findings, as well as conclusions that arise from social inquiry are creations of the mind of the enquirer (Ziman, 2002). This position finds concordance with the assertion by Johansen (1999) that the social world is primarily relativistic and can only be decoded from the perspective of the individual observer who is intricately interwoven with the activities under investigation. Both in its metaphysical, epistemological and methodological mutations, solipsism furnishes the scholarly voyager, a picture of the clarity and beauty of human thought process in its self- contained state.

The philosophical genome of Descartes found expression in the arguments put forward by Littlejohn (1989) that: (1) whatever is known has a knower (2) knowledge is the outcome of interaction between the knower and the known (3) multiple observers will see things in multiple perspectives and assign multiple meanings (4) all this points out that knowledge is derived from perception. In a similarly thought trajectory, Blumer (1969) made a submission that (1) the action of human beings towards things is a function of the meanings they have for them (2) the meaning of such things is a product of the social interaction between the observer and others (3) the meanings are modified and interpreted by the individual who encounters the environment.

On the other divide of this philosophical curtain are the ‘anti-solipsists’ - the realists, positivists objectivists and empiricists. The vitriolic attack on Cartesian - Idealistic Solipsism

is borne out of its perceived philosophical opacity, its narcissistic colouration, its individuation of mental categories without reference to external causes and effects, its absence of dialogue, and its lack of correspondence with external reality or empirical world (Lasch, 1978; Blumer, 1969). Schwartz (2008) aptly pointed out that the problem of solipsism is inherent in its supposition of total isolation from external reality wherein the inquirer is incurably consigned to a world of his/her own creation, thereby not recognizing commonalities in standards of measurement, values and morality. Descartes appears to have presented a hollow theory as his "*cogito ergo sum*" turns a blind eye to the fallibility of the human senses. The human organs of perception are noted in their capacity to deceive the observer in terms of what is believed to be an estimation of reality.

Further repudiatory remarks against solipsism were made by Thornton (1995) who submitted that "the proposition that 'I am the only mind that exists' makes sense only to the extent that it is expressed in a public language, and the existence of such language itself implies the existence of a social context....Solipsism therefore presupposes everything it seeks to deny. That solipsistic thoughts are thinkable in the first instance implies that the existence of public, shared, intersubjective world that they purport to call into question".

In a most lucid manner, Johnstone (1991) captured the disdain which philosophers and social scientists have for solipsism as a sophomoric nonsense which is irrelevant, impracticable, capable of only playing the role of "*absurdum in reducto ad absurdum* arguments". He further went on to say that most thinkers view Cartesianly clothed Solipsism as an inordinate demand of impossibility or a rotten fruit of misconstrued epistemological thesis.

The credibility of various approaches to social inquiry as a means of understanding, interpreting and estimating reality has also been called to question in the halls of postmodernism, relativism and hermeneutics (King, et al, 1994)

The Cartesian thesis which ascribes impartiality and absoluteness to the mind of the observer (as in the case a solipsistic rationalist) is viewed by postmodernism as a deliberate blockage to empirical treatment and therefore cannot stand before scrutiny (Antonio and Keller, 2011).

The postmodernist position captured the hermeneutical complexities in social inquiry as identified by Blumer (1954) who asserted that the investigator, as it is with human conduct, is inclined to shield himself or shy away from criticism in order to preserve the self's conception of reality or truth. This surely translates to solipsism which means that the mind knows nothing but its own perceptions.

Sharing a notable affinity with the above are the observations of Bonner (1994) who submitted that interpretivist social inquiry has a restricted demand for standardization and stifles the need to share knowledge of the real world between the observer and the object of study.

In an attempt to escape from the fly bottle of solipsism, social scientists have come up with approaches such as the mixed method – the pluralistic democratization of social inquiry. But, however hard sociologists may try to be objective, and however meticulously they may have argued to arrive at the finest ontological position, the personal idiosyncrasies and prejudices of the observer always impinge upon the interpretation of the scientific evidence (Gilovich, et al, 2002; Krueger and Funder, 2004).

Blumer (1954) asserted that within the scientific method of social inquiry, “one can operate unwittingly with false premises, erroneous problems, distorted data, spurious relations, inaccurate concepts and unverified interpretations”. This notion that the personal biases of the inquirer are capable of skewing the interpretation of social reality has been muted in the Baconian days (Lord, et al, 1979). MacCoun (1998) pointed out that the scientific process of social inquiry is not free from error or bias from the observer. These include strategy based error whereby result findings may be misconstrued through (a) fallacious deductive syllogisms, (b) failure to make adjustments for non-independence among evidentiary items (c) Mismatch between correlation and causation, and (d) reliance on heuristic persuasive cues (e.g. appeal to an investigator’s prestige or credential – egoistic solipsism). MacCoun (1998) also submitted that confirmatory bias is exhibited in the circles of positivist or realist social inquiry whenever hypotheses that have more chances of being confirmed are formulated, despite the low truth value of such hypotheses. Bonner (1994) traced the problem of the other mind to the doorstep of the statistical quantitative social scientists by inferring that the narcissistic view they hold in respect of their procedure and methodology smacks of solipsistic orientation of the everyday member. From the foregoing, it means that both qualitative and quantitative worlds of social inquiry are entrapped by the snare of solipsism.

Johnstone (1991) succinctly pointed out that no matter the conclusion that solipsism is a foolish doctrine, all attempts to prove its foolishness rather ended up in validating it, and it cannot be ignored even if many scholars have not taken it seriously. True to it, despite the criticisms about its epistemological and ontological ill-posturing, and perceived opacity, solipsism continues to elongate its shadow along the corridors of social enquiry.

### **Conclusion**

The philosophical journey of Descarte’s Cogito may have seem to be a futile one as no individual appreciates the motion of being alone in the social universe; yet, in the presence of certain epistemological and ontological arguments, it becomes difficult to ignore it.

The problem of solipsism has an intrinsic value of creating opportunity for the apostles of various paradigms to find a unified approach to social inquiry. A constructive dialogue between the quantitative and qualitative schools of thoughts is required for a better illumination of the research process. However, standing alone, solipsism as a philosophical paradigm tends to establish skepticism in social reality. This tends to be gainful in getting closer and closer to the truth because of the value of the argument that true knowledge-seekers should doubt all things except the facts of their thoughts. Considering this, solipsism provides the principal content of Kant’s critical realism.

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