

Techio, J. 2021. *The Threat of Solipsism: Wittgenstein and Cavell on Meaning, Skepticism, and Finitude*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter. ISBN: 978-3-11-070265-1; DOI: 10.1515/9783110702859. 223 pages.

Philosophical inquiry and research are traditionally tied to specific questions that a layperson would often find odd, if not entirely pointless. This distance between philosophy and our daily practices can be seen quite clearly expressed in those philosophical topics that easily elicit bewildered stares from non-philosophical interlocutors. It is not by mere chance that such topics are often foundational issues within philosophical inquiries and their history. The question of whether one can ever know that a table, clearly present to the sight of everyone in the room, really is there instead of being a mere illusion, dream, or massive deception, is challenging to be taken seriously by one's interlocutors. The problem itself appears quixotic. The same thing holds with the idea that, given that all experience appears to be intrinsically first-personal, there is the possibility that nothing exists outside the mental life of the individual subject undergoing their flux of experiences. At best, the people one is talking to will wonder whether whoever is saying these things isn't acting out some paranoia or delusions of grandeur. At worst, they might even feel that such a thesis is demeaning towards them, the other minds currently in the room.

The Threat of Solipsism by Jônadas Techio – associate professor of philosophy at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil – is a book whose founding insight lies in showing that there is more to such philosophical questions than mere philosophical reverie or intellectual hubris. Topics such as solipsism and skepticism are routinely excluded from philosophical inquiry's more practical and applicative aspects. Techio attempts instead to show how they both constitute intellectual attempts to come to terms with or avoid the existential angst arising from the dimension of human finitude. Human finitude is connected to the feeling of disappointment we acknowledge *as human beings* first and successively as philosophers in registering our experiences of estrangement, separation, and alienation from the world and other human beings (5).¹

Loneliness, anxiety, and despair concerning who we are, what we do in the (our) world, and our relationship with others are emotions whose effect and importance establish a threat to our well-being that cannot be written off as philosophical extravaganza. This threat, however, does find expression in

1 Page references, unless specified, will refer to Techio's book throughout this review.

the philosophical problem of solipsism – and its related issue of skepticism (about the world and especially other minds). Techio aims to present solipsism as a “radical effort at reckoning with finitude which nonetheless falls short of the mark and ends up deflecting or repressing the very existential realization which is at its root” (6). By analyzing an otherwise scholastic philosophical problem, Techio aims to think through it to “achieve a more resolute acknowledgment and acceptance of finitude” (ibid.).

The most interesting aspect of this attempt resides in the choice of authors that Techio intends to engage with to achieve his aim. Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell are philosophers whose main intellectual ethos is often incompatible with traditionally practiced philosophy. The more metaphysical, speculative dimension of philosophical questioning, theorizing, and inquiry is in their philosophies shown to betray crucial misunderstandings of how we employ words and how we conduct ourselves as human beings in our ordinary lives. Techio’s topic choice might seem incompatible with such a metaphilosophical stance. In addition, Techio’s own implicit interpretive background – the ‘New Wittgenstein’ interpretation heralded by Cora Diamond, James Conant, and whose spiritual forefather is considered to be Cavell himself – is often considered to have as its central thesis the idea that (the whole of) Wittgenstein’s philosophy is a crucially therapeutic exercise aiming to make manifest the implicit nonsense of traditional philosophical expressions and assertions.

What is Techio’s strategy to reconcile this apparent conflict of interest? A recurrent methodological choice throughout the book’s seven chapters is to show the interplay between the various voices at work in the texts. Techio essays focus precisely on this aspect showing there is more to a purely anti-metaphysical and deflationist stance in Wittgenstein and Cavell. Their reference to the ordinary dimension of our lives and practices is not a reductive, simplistic, almost Moorean endorsement of a naïve realist philosophy. In undergoing philosophical therapy, we need to see how solipsism and skepticism as philosophical possibilities arise out of genuine intricacies, contradictions, and existential disagreements we experience in our lives as human beings (10–11). Showing this involves lending them philosophical credence, hearing them out, and allowing them to state their case to reveal the existential angst behind them acting as their source and status as ultimately mistaken attempts to evade facing our human condition. In doing so, Techio’s book goes already beyond a strict interpretation of the neo-Wittgensteinian tenet that philosophical problems and theses are a matter of mere nonsense. Acknowledging the existential roots behind solipsism and skepticism means recognizing that

these questions belong in our life threads. Certain unlivable philosophical positions are failed attempts to avoid or engage with such questions.

The book is articulated in seven essays already published in previous forms and lengths in various journals, from *Philosophical Topics* to *Wittgenstein-Studien*. They are arranged in two main parts. The first three essays focus on solipsism, re-tracing all the major steps of Wittgenstein's philosophical development, from the *Tractatus* (= TLP), through the *Philosophical Remarks* and the *Blue Book* (= BB), to the *Philosophical Investigations*. In the four latter essays, the topic squarely places itself on the issue of philosophical skepticism, focusing more on the distinctive Cavellian perspective in conjunction with the topics of other minds, meaning, and morality. We won't try here to survey every single chapter, given their being ultimately self-standing contributions. Instead, the aim is to underline those moments of interest and possible further inquiry that Techio's book proposes.

The first chapter, on solipsism in the *Tractatus* and its connection to the problem of the limits of sense and intelligibility, provides a clear case of the kind of methodology that Techio endorses, the one already mentioned of letting the various voices in the text come out fully and engage with each other. It also introduces what it means to engage seriously with a thesis seemingly as implausible as solipsism. As in all readings of the *Tractatus* of a neo-Wittgensteinian bent, great importance is played on its self-undoing propositions and their relations to the point of the *Tractatus* as a whole, the idea of "draw[ing] a limit to thought or rather – not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts" (TLP 3). Due to its almost puzzling nature, its preface is the starting point of Techio's analysis, in the sense that what it professes seems *prima facie* in direct contrast with much of its actual content (23). The self-undoing sections of the *Tractatus* also heighten these tensions. Wittgenstein does not seem to remain entirely silent on what should be passed over in silence, nor he merely allows propositions of 'natural science' to achieve his goals. He allows many theses which Techio recognizes as distinctively *metaphysical* (26). The chapter's goal is to see how such tensions can be eased to understand better Wittgenstein's contention that in overcoming the propositions of the *Tractatus*, one finally sees the world aright (TLP 6.54).

The problem of solipsism in the *Tractatus* is Techio's focus to accomplish this stated goal, as expressed in the famous proposition 5.6, which reads, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." Techio correctly highlights that in section 5 of the *Tractatus*, the question of limits is internal, one of *necessary congruence* of the limits of language and world, in the sense that they are different aspects of the *same* limits (29). But then, Techio asks, why is the

first-person formulation essential? Why 'my' world and 'my' language? This is because, in a markedly Kantian way,² a subject representing how things are in the world acts as a condition of representation (31). This, however, makes vivid the issue of solipsism. Are the conditions of representation I institute as a representing subject necessarily the same as everybody else's? As proposition 5.62 makes explicit, what the solipsist *means* is correct but cannot be said. It must make itself *manifest*. What is *this* supposed to mean?

Techio's merit in answering this question is to reject as inadequate the reading which assigns to the proposition a mere trivial statement, i.e., there is nothing to understand beyond the limits of what *I* understand. This would clash with the fact that Wittgenstein continues to elaborate on something that would amount to sheer nonsense, according to this reading. Instead, Techio analyses how many propositions around 5.6 have a distinctively *self-subversive* character (38) that makes explicit how the separation between subject and world is mistaken. The thesis of solipsism makes the subject disappear to the point where the only thing left is the reality coordinated with it (40). For Techio, this indicates how solipsism essentially agrees with a direct realist position (TLP 5.64) and encapsulates the demand for answering the existential question of metaphysical and epistemological loneliness and angst. Wittgenstein makes a self-conscious use of self-subverting nonsensical propositions and theses to show how certain philosophical stances, such as solipsism, do not satisfactorily answer such worries. This process should also free us from the impulse to address and express things beyond the congruence between language and world.

The open question that Techio addresses in the last part of this chapter is to explain how solipsism is a mistaken way of addressing existentially real concerns. These are the two 'fears' of metaphysical loneliness and meaninglessness. Solipsism's problem is that once everything is reduced to the point of the self, assuring the necessary congruence of self and world, this endpoint seems to provide little solace to the existential problem. However, Techio recognizes that Wittgenstein's insistence that the solipsist's answer cannot be said nor be a satisfactory answer could be perceived as a piece of dogmatism (43). The idea that all the solipsist wants to say and offer amounts to nonsense must be given a foundation without, at the same time, offering a piece of substantial philosophical theorizing that would be at odds with Wittgenstein's therapeutic intent.

2 See in particular the analysis Techio gives of proposition 5.62 at page 34, in terms of the subject providing a *determinate sense* to her propositions.

To avoid this outcome, Techio borrows from Denis McManus the idea that such theorizing assumes a nonsensicality criterion independent of any method of assigning meaning to signs (46). Following the position of ‘mono’-Wittgensteinianism, Techio applies the idea – usually connected to the later Wittgenstein – that the use of words, names, and signs plays a constituting function in what one can say and which utterances are nonsense. This clarification lies at the heart of the encounter with the solipsistic position. It reveals its answers to existential angst as already assuming the whole host of metaphysical doctrines that drove the very possibility of loneliness and meaninglessness. Letting go of overarching metaphysical constructions means letting go of a need for an external warrant for meaning, sense, and agreement with others. The truth of solipsism lies in its making us realize the radical contingency of these terms, and their fragility, leading us to *accept* our finitude as the ground for mutual acknowledgment and understanding.

The book’s first chapter is the longest among the seven essays and clearly exemplifies the virtues of Techio’s work. The need to not shy away from the tensions and appearing contradiction of Wittgenstein’s text, resisting the urge to simply dismiss as nonsense entire dimensions of possible discourse while allowing a self-reflective stance on philosophical problems whose substance might then vanish into thin air. The idea that engaging with solipsism functions as a kind of purgative of the philosophical mind employs a concept alive in philosophy since ancient Pyrrhonism, allowing the reader to obtain a more nuanced view of the issues at hand. Specifically, it cures us of the urge to refute or defeat the ‘implausible’ solipsistic opponent without making us fall into the same dead-ends that constituted its perceived threat in the first place. However, some worries remain concerning the metaphilosophical stance that Techio’s analysis institutes.³ The main issue is that the simple realization of the fragility of human acknowledgment and understanding might seem incapable of dealing with human existential angst, as the solipsistic position failed to do. Letting go of external warrant on meaning and sense left us with little to hang on to but complete contingency and uncertainty. If this is the endpoint of the Wittgensteinian stance, then this will leave exposed the flank to those who decree Wittgenstein’s philosophy as offering nothing to *actual* philosophical problems. If the alternative is between unbounded acceptance of finitude, hence of the possibility of meaninglessness, solitude, and loss of understanding, and the possibility of providing a substantial metaphysical theory whose aim is to rid us of such worries with a direct refutation of solipsism, it seems

3 There will be no objection to the exegetical aspects in Techio’s volume, as this review is not the place to carry out such tasks.

undeniable that the latter option will appear to many as more attractive. In this sense, the book displays a long-standing issue of works carried out within the neo-Wittgensteinian approach; by keeping the character of Wittgensteinian therapy *within* Wittgensteinian scholarship, it offers little in terms of persuading non-Wittgensteinians that *this* metaphilosophical stance should be heeded.

The next chapter I want to investigate more in detail is the third one, concerning privacy and solipsism in the *Blue Book*. The *Blue Book* represents the 'middle' period of Wittgenstein's philosophy at the beginning of the 30s, but it already shows many traits that will clearly emerge in the *Philosophical Investigations*, such as the role of linguistic games and grammar.⁴ Techio aims to investigate some of the most striking assertions of the *Blue Book* against the very possibility of reference concerning the pronoun 'I.' This is because Techio wants to show how those perspectives that simply ascribe to Wittgenstein's *Blue Book* a 'non-referential view' against the pronoun's role in self-ascriptive psychological statements entirely miss out on the therapeutical character of the *Blue Book* (96).

Per the overall spirit of the volume, Techio identifies Wittgenstein's engagement with solipsism in the *Blue Book* as arising out of intellectual temptation. Reflecting on our experience of reality, we are tempted to think that the only reality is just that, the personal experience (BB, 45). The issue of agreement with something external makes everything collapse into the internal. However, for Wittgenstein, this is merely the result of confusion, a conflation of different language games and their connected grammar. The solipsist is brought into dialogue with a non-philosophical opponent, representing everyday life. However, Techio does not give in to the idea that simply doing so is enough to cure us of linguistic and grammatical confusions. He acknowledges that recounting common sense beliefs or adhering to the dogmatist tendencies of philosophical common sense would do nothing to dissipate the philosopher's doubt (100). In fact, the solipsist glimpses more into the ambiguities and depths of our grammar than a realist philosopher would.

However, this does not simply mean that the solipsist is right. The solipsist wants to substitute a new – solipsistic – notation that would express the kind of insight discovered. This is motivated by a 'craving' to answer a metaphysical question that ordinary language cannot satisfy. The main theme of the first chapter re-emerges here: the solipsist is still trying to impose a specific and univocal, metaphysical picture as much as those realist stances that solipsism

⁴ Instead of, for example, the phenomenological character pervading the *Philosophical Remarks*.

is a consequence of tried to do. Wittgensteinian therapy rejects this idea of an a priori model that will explain how self-ascriptive reference works, be it the solipsistic 'I' or some of its radical declinations like a bundle theory of the self. The solipsist ends up inverting the relationship of linguistic priority that we endorse in our everyday use of words by borrowing and smuggling concepts and ideas from ordinary language to place them in a context – philosophical reflection – where it shouldn't be any wonder that they cannot function as they should. But Wittgenstein himself is not against the idea of alternative notations for our ordinary resources. What he proposes is, however, marked by the idea of highlighting grammatical *differences* over convergences to dissipate the “mental mist” (110) surrounding how we actually use language games, avoiding a “hasty assimilation of all sorts of use [of the pronoun 'I'] to the narrow paradigm of reference” (111). Again, Wittgenstein rejects the ‘craving for generality’ that philosophy carries with it. His therapy intends to attack the distortions that the psychological uses of 'I' and its ‘use as subject’ carry with them and give rise to the solipsistic temptation.

What is more interesting in this third chapter is its attempt to recover the therapeutic aim that Techio aptly connects to the same kind of intellectual temptation identified in the first chapter. However, here we can also see that the overarching aims and themes we outlined in presenting this volume might lapse or momentarily disappear. Solipsism is here not connected in detail to the kind of existential motivations that the first chapter had masterfully presented. In fact, this chapter seems to present a more ‘plain’ conception of Wittgensteinian therapy, where solipsism arises only from the misuse of the psychological ‘use as subject’ aspect of the pronoun 'I.' Additionally, Techio's analysis creates moments of puzzlement. The author is adamant in saying that Wittgenstein is not against alternative notations and that physical and psychological predicates of self-ascription are extremes of a range of uses he does not want to show as mistaken. But then it is not at all clear why the uses on the psychological pole of the spectrum, those that lead the way to solipsistic musings, are illegitimate or must necessarily involve linguistic distortions while others do not. Techio's analysis does not manage on this score to show what makes solipsism an existential temptation beyond the obvious philosophical one and why this philosophical temptation in particular must be redeemed of its singular intellectual illegitimacy.

While we mainly focused on the Wittgensteinian aspect of Techio's book, it is only fair that we dedicate some part of this review to the other actor engaged in at length in the volume, i.e., Stanley Cavell. Chapter four focuses on comparing Saul Kripke and Stanley Cavell on the topic of rule-following skepticism. Specifically, the comparison is of considerable interest in its trying

not to provide yet another refutation of Kripkenstein's monster arising out of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Instead, Techio attempts to show how Kripke and Cavell's readings form two complementary understandings of the general problem: a *prospective movement* where nonsense is made manifest and a *retrospective movement* that brings back words to their ordinary usage (120). While Kripke's reading endorses, in Techio's view, the first perspective, only Cavell's can satisfactorily dissolve the rule-following problem. Yet, Cavell's own perspective underestimates the therapeutical character embodied in Kripke's reading.

Techio's presentation of the rule-following problem focuses almost entirely on the *skeptical* solution offered by Kripke. In particular, the idea that assertability conditions in relation to a community are connected to the possibility of standing disagreement between what one is doing and what others in the community are willing to attribute to him as asserting makes the solution *skeptical* (126). He then presents Cavell's protestation against Kripke that there is no "skeptical crisis of meaning," because the whole of the rule-following problem, as Kripke understands it, is predicated on the mistaken idea of rule-following as dependent on a particular interpretation of the rule. This complaint is often found in other neo-Wittgensteinian philosophers, most notably John McDowell. For Techio, both Kripke and Cavell underplay the dialectic of the *Philosophical Investigations*, neglecting that the rule-following problem pertains to the *confused* state of mind of Wittgenstein's interlocutor (128). Notwithstanding his professed criticism of Kripke and Cavell, Techio shares the main interpretative tenet of Cavell's criticism of Kripke, that the rule-following problem stems from a supposed interpretative requirement. The issue with Cavell's reading – according to Techio – is that it is too eager to dismiss the skeptical impulse of the problem.

Cavell's point is that we don't need to come to an agreement; we don't need to achieve this. Instead, we simply find ourselves in such an agreement. There is nothing more profound than this fact, even if this is not a fact about the world as the traditional picture of meaning and normativity would have it. For Techio, Kripke's diagnosis is limited in stopping at the skeptical point, while Cavell's point is more attuned to the dimension of the ordinary where we bring back our usage of words from their metaphysical (mis)treatment (133). Additionally, Kripke's solution emphasizes too much the idea of the community as the ultimate external authority, an impersonal way out of the paradox. Cavell's stance is more accepting that our finitude implies the absence of metaphysical or normative shortcuts to what we mean and intend. There is a standing element of risk in meaning something, a risk that Kripke's solution suppresses together with suppressing our individual responsibility (140).

I want to highlight briefly some issues with Techio's endorsement of Cavell's position over Kripke's. His analysis, while extremely interesting in placing the rule-following issue within the general scheme of the volume, also engenders some moments of puzzlement. Firstly, the idea that the rule-following paradox is necessarily based on the idea that meaning requires interpretation can be questioned, as the issue can also be understood as raising a specific *justificatory* problem. Wittgenstein introduced interpretation in the *Philosophical Investigations* as a possible way of answering the paradox before ultimately discarding it. However, this rejection alone does not show us the way out of the paradox, nor that it *isn't* a paradox. This point is connected to the second aspect of Techio's endorsement of Cavell's position that I want to question. If Cavell's position is reduced to a mere 'de-factoism', the mere recognition that we find ourselves in agreement, then this seems much closer to an actual skeptical conclusion than Techio is willing to acknowledge. Mere happenstance leaves entirely unaddressed the idea that in meaning something, in proceeding in a certain way while following a rule, this is something we can – and ought to – rationally defend. Notice how rejecting this idea also undermines the claim of bringing our words back to the ordinary realm. The idea that what we say and do has reasons backing them up is a stance that we'd ordinarily endorse, even if not in the Platonist, strictly truth-functional way that meaning realism requires. It is undoubtedly a more widespread idea than simply thinking that the mere happening of agreement with others is all there is. Finally, it is doubtful whether Kripke's skeptical solution necessitates the idea of an external authority that has nothing to do with our actual use of words and our engagement with other subjects. In fact, such a depersonalized authority in the way Techio, following Cavell, depicts would hardly classify as a solution to the rule-following paradox, which constitutes a problem about rational normative authority.

These observations, which should be taken mainly to suggest further avenues of discussion, can help highlight a general issue with the second half of Techio's book. While skepticism is sometimes tentatively connected with underlying existential worries, there is a sense of refusal in facing the possibility that skepticism might be ultimately correct. The *truth of skepticism* Cavell talks about is itself given short shrift in its being a threat to human knowledge and meaning. This can be seen, for example, in the interesting analysis of the exchange between Cavell and Stroud in chapter six. Techio aptly recognizes that in Cavell's understanding, skepticism is more than merely a theoretical challenge; it concerns our disappointment with the world and our relationship with others. However, he also tends to gloss over that in engaging with skepticism and recognizing its truth, we are bound to acquire a different

perspective on what knowledge is and requires, one that cannot leave certain common-sensical tenets untouched. In general, Techio's volume struggles with an internal tension. It wants to go beyond the canonical anti-metaphysical and deflationist interpretations of Wittgenstein's work and generally of the topics of solipsism and skepticism. However, it remains at times strait-jacketed by its own interpretative framework, where what matters at the end is to make disguised nonsense explicit. This can also be seen in the absence of discussion of what has been otherwise acknowledged as a weighty *thesis* of the later Wittgenstein, the private language argument, which could have otherwise had some interesting connections with the perfectionist themes of the last chapter. In this sense, there is a missed opportunity concerning bringing the reflections on finitude, existential angst, skepticism, and solipsism into a broader philosophical arena. These remarks should not be taken as arguing against the status of this volume as a solid and remarkable piece of scholarly work. Far from it, they should suggest the richness of themes, angles, and topics that Techio's book both engages with and elicits, showing how they are far from exhausted avenues of research.

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