The solipsist claims that only he and his experiences exist. Wittgenstein’s response is not an denial but an attempt to show that solipsism loses its intended meaning on the way to achieving the truth that it aspires to achieve. This objection makes its impact at two distinct points: first, on the claim that only he exists, and second, on the claim that only his experiences exist.

Any account of this controversy must start with a general explanation of the way in which solipsism is supposed to lose its meaning. The idea is that the unique subject of all experiences needs to be identified in some way, and so too does that totality of experiences. If the required identifications are not forthcoming, the solipsist’s claim will lose its intended meaning, because he will merely be saying that the only subject that exists is the one who has all the experiences that there are, and that the only experiences that exist are those that are had by whatever subject there is. Or rather, even this is more than he can legitimately say, because it would imply that there is a single subject, and a multitude of experiences and there is nothing to guarantee either of these two implications. So all that is left is a general conceptual connection between subjects and sets of experiences and no way of identifying a particular of either of the two connected types. That is how solipsism is supposed to lose its intended meaning.

This line of thought was first developed by Wittgenstein in *Notebooks 1914-1916*, where the suggestion was that the only way in which the solipsist can identify his ego is through its association with his body, which, of course, would refute his theory.\(^1\) The eye

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is brought into the controversy as the analogy of the ego. When the
solipsist is told that he cannot give his claim the meaning that he
wants to give it, he will, of course, reject the criticism. He will
concede that, when he refers to two conceptually connected objects,
he will have to give one of them an independent identification: e.g.
if he refers to a country and its capital city, but offers no independent
identification of either of them, he will not succeed in conveying a
determinate message. However, he will argue that the criticism
cannot be extended to himself and his experiences. He knows
exactly whom he means when he uses the pronom “I”, because his
identity is transparent to himself and does not need to be mediated
by any mode of presentation. It is against this defence that Wittgen-
stein uses the analogy between ego and eye.

The basic point of analogy is this: nobody can see his own eye
directly and, similarly, nobody is directly aware of his own ego. The
idea is Schopenhauer’s: “... the ‘I’ is the dark point in consciousness,
as on the retina the exact point at which the nerve of sight enters is
blind, as the brain itself is entirely without sensation, the body of
the sun is dark, and the eye sees all except itself.”

If the analogy amounted to no more than this, one might infer
that, just as one’s eye is something which one happens to be unable
to see directly, so too one’s ego is something which happens to be
inaccessible to introspection. However, Wittgenstein added a further
development to the analogy which was intended to show that the
ego is not an object and, therefore, not something that is only
contingently inaccessible. The ego, he suggested, is not like the
“physical eye” but like the “geometrical eye”.

In The Blue Book he introduces the phrase “geometrical eye”
not as a designation of an object but as a phrase which has a meaning
only in a special context. The context is the instruction “Point to

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1916, and 15th Oct. 1915. The same line of thought is presented less perspicuously
in L. Wittgenstein: Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, tr. C.K. Ogden, Routledge,

2. A. Schopenhauer: The World as Will and Idea, tr. R.B. Haldane and J.

3. See Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 5.632-5.634.

pp. 63-4.