FROM THE ABYSS OF LONELINESS TO THE BLISS OF SOLITUDE

Cultural, Social and Psychoanalytic Perspectives

Edited by

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and Michael B. Buchholz**

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Editors' introduction

Loneliness is one of a handful of phenomena experienced by everyone and the cause of a host of troubles in everyday lives of millions of people around the globe. It is undeniably connected to emotional pain, social maladjustment, health conditions, especially cardiovascular, and life expectancy—all in the negative. Orphanages from Communist Romania have proven, hopefully for the last time, that growing up in social isolation has disastrous consequences for children's development, both cognitive and emotional. A Harvard-based study (Waldinger, 2015) that followed subjects from early childhood into their mid-eighties found that the best predictor of happiness in old age was the quality and richness of social life in middle age.

It is an uncanny coincidence that this book was co-edited and written partly during the pandemic and lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. So many people suffered from loneliness, while others enjoyed their solitude, and many epidemiological studies were published about the ways the pandemic increased the experience of this tormenting mental state. Although loneliness has always been here and bothered many individuals, it now came to the foreground and it seems everyone became aware of its importance.

Aristotle, and John Bowlby, and everyone in between, had the same attitude towards the issue of loneliness: that it is against human nature, dangerous, tolerable only by a select few. We often feel that it is a form of punishment and develop strategies to avoid it; countless works of art are devoted to describing how it changes us. We must not forget, however, all those creative spirits who search for temporary aloneness that will provide a setting for concentration and dedication. Be it an ascetic attempt to control the body and purify the soul or the scientific or artistic absorption by the newest inspiration, many have felt that only inner solitude and social isolation can provide the subtlest and most fragile concentration necessary for bringing the work to fruition. Solitude also has the aura of a state not many people are capable of attaining,

and they are, probably at the same time, revered and envied. We do not really know how to develop it, despite many religious and spiritual approaches that have spent centuries in refining effective yet cautious approaches to it. And it seems particularly under threat now, when our everyday lives are bombarded by countless messages and superficial contacts.

Psychoanalytic consulting rooms are equally full of loneliness as the world around them is, if not even more. Psychoanalysts listen about the pain of loneliness every day and are offering themselves as "companions in solitude" to help their patients learn how to use their alone time in the most beneficial way. There is a widespread belief that loneliness is the most fundamental problem every mental health patient suffers from, although its manifestations may differ. At least three classical psychoanalytic papers were devoted to loneliness, yet they were all written in the late 1950s. Is there anything contemporary psychoanalysis can add to this?

Sadly, psychoanalysts write very little about loneliness and even less about solitude. It is an interesting phenomenon that Freud barely mentioned loneliness, and many dictionaries of psychoanalysis do not have entries for either loneliness or solitude. In the *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (Mijolla, 2005), we, surprisingly, found not more than ten mentions of "loneliness", but not a separate entry, and the situation is similar in Salman Akhtar's *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (2009). Both concepts are also barely present on the PEP-Web when one looks for papers explicitly focused on them, although it is more frequently mentioned: "There are few publications that are dedicated to studying loneliness but it remains a powerful descriptor in our literature" (Lynch, 2013, p. xv).

Two collections of psychoanalytic essays were published in the last ten years, *Loneliness and Longing: Conscious and Unconscious Aspects* from 2012, edited by Willock et al., and *Encounters with Loneliness: Only The Lonely* from 2013, edited by Richards et al. At the time of writing this text, they were quoted eight times each. We believe this is not a consequence of the quality of these two books, as they both offer inspiring insights, but of the surprising lack of interest among the potential audience.

This is particularly strange given that we have recently become aware that loneliness can also plague analysts, who might try to avoid it through overworking, abuse, or self-harm. To the best of our knowledge, Freud never described himself as lonely. But psychoanalysts of subsequent generations described their place behind the couch as lonely (Buechler, 1998, 2012; Greene & Kaplan, 1978; Schafer, 1995). Four chapters of the *Encounters with Loneliness* book are devoted to the psychoanalytic training process (pp. 159–219), and three chapters of *Loneliness and Longing* to the traumatised analyst's loneliness (pp. 175–209). Even more striking are the findings by Sharon Klayman Farber, who interviewed a large number of psychotherapists only to find that

> practicing psychotherapy can impede one's ability to form healthy, fulfilling personal relationships when the relationships with one's own patients [become] the sole source of fulfilling relationships … more prone to mental illness, substance abuse, sexual actingout, and suicide. (2017, p. 37)

It is difficult to believe that psychotherapists are not alarmed by this and are not looking for solutions. Another problem is parochialism. Both the above-mentioned collections of essays by large groups of psychoanalysts (2012, 2013) take into account almost no research data about loneliness. In the same vein, the comprehensive *Handbook of Solitude* (Coplan & Bowker, 2014) includes only one chapter about psychoanalysis (Galanaki, 2014) with hardly any references to contemporary trends, and the most important loneliness researcher does not even mention psychoanalysis in a book of more than 300 pages (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). At the same time, the most prominent loneliness scholar is a philosopher (Mijuskovic, 2019), and a branch of philosophical analysis focused on aloneness, named monoseology, is being developed (Domeracki, 2020).

We thus hope to offer a comprehensive treatise of loneliness and solitude, firmly founded in cultural and philosophical contemplations, always consulting epidemiological, developmental, social, and neuroscience research, while retaining a clinical psychoanalytic focus. To achieve that, we tried to provide answers to five questions, which we will summarise here.

What loneliness, what solitude?

One question comes to the fore at the very opening: Is loneliness a psychological phenomenon or an effect (and if so, of what)? Can you avoid loneliness or is it an anthropological condition, impossible to escape (Pohlmann, 2011)? And does loneliness exist in nature, independent of humans?

Many different terms are used when it comes to this topic and throughout this book: aloneness, loneliness, solitude, isolation, withdrawal, seclusion, privacy—these are only some of them. We would like to begin by disentangling them. Luckily, in English, that is not a demanding task, as different terms exist for different states.

The term *aloneness* means that someone is, temporarily or permanently, isolated from other people and does not have anyone to communicate with at that moment. This is a factual and psychological category and does not say anything about possible emotional reactions or wishes to change that situation.

Loneliness is not the state of being alone, though it is often mistaken as such. It is a painful feeling of estrangement or social separation from meaningful others; an emotional lack that concerns a person's place in the world. Although these two states frequently overlap, one can be alone and feel no pain about it or experience utter loneliness while surrounded by people.

At the opposite end, *solitude* is aloneness sought, sometimes even planned and desired, so that one can devote oneself to union with nature, creative activity, or religious ecstasy. The same person can experience aloneness one time as painful (loneliness) and another time as blissful (solitude).

Why loneliness, why solitude?

The first reason to study loneliness and its effects is that it is a widespread, almost universal phenomenon and source of suffering. Recently, even governments have realised that loneliness is a problem they have to try to solve. In the UK, two years before the pandemic, in 2018, a Ministry of Loneliness was established, only a couple of decades after Margaret Thatcher brought forward the idea that "there's no such thing as society", when only self-interest seemed to count, and the "self-against-society" configuration became prominent. Indeed, people living in more individualistic societies report that they experience higher levels of loneliness (Barreto et al., 2021).

The "quantity" goes hand in hand with "quality"—loneliness is painful, difficult to endure, exhausting, both psychologically and physiologically. We now have a very clear picture of its disastrous effects on somatic health (and one chapter of this book is devoted to that) and it has long been obvious that loneliness can be both an important cause and a common consequence of mental disorders. Again, policymakers have to do something about this because loneliness turns out to be very costly if you count the number of work absences, hospitals days, or indeed mortality rates. Many questions open for researchers as well, like what is the reason for loneliness to be so harmful, or how come human kind still has not developed better ways to prevent all this turmoil?

The situation with solitude is, one more time, completely the opposite, in that it is scarce, cherished, and might be instrumental for personality development and creativity. Despite all this, it is not understood nearly well enough and it is even more rarely supported. We can only hypothesise, but it seems that learning how to "guard" one's own and other people's solitude would bring abundant fruit.

Where loneliness, where solitude?

It is also interesting that loneliness can have clear spatial and temporal boundaries. Prisons, for example, are institutions where social isolation, to the level of solitary cells, is used as a form of punishment. And even when some forms of social bond are developed between prisoners, the feelings of loneliness are pervasive, together with shame, alienation, and humiliation. The reasons for this are obvious—this form of aloneness is almost never chosen, there is always an element of coercion in coming to prisons and staying there until "the end of time". The most horrifying examples of this are certainly the Nazi concentration camps and Soviet Gulags, both described by many survivors. The case can be frighteningly similar with psychiatric asylums, as many have witnessed since the memoirs, studies, or novels by the likes of Artaud, Goffman, and Ken Kessey; foster homes, especially for children who are repeatedly forced to move from one to the other; boarding schools, which are believed to cause a specific psychiatric syndrome; migrants in a queue before the administration opens in an early morning hour. Although some people join monasteries, military barracks, or refugee camps voluntarily, not only are some forced to do so but also long-term stays in any of them may lead to chronic isolation and

loneliness. There are also unexpected places of loneliness, like hotel rooms, where touring actors and singers, especially after long applauses and feelings of narcissistic fulfilment, have to face empty and impersonal spaces again and again.

At many places of loneliness, the greatest torment is described as not being able or allowed to experience solitude, never having any privacy in the constant presence of unknown others. A recommendation related to this was made couple of decades ago (Deleuze, 1993, p. 188): the problem is not to make people talk, but to provide them with empty spaces of solitude and silence from which they would finally have something to say. The powers of oppression do not prevent people from talking; on the contrary, they force them to do so. But all of a sudden there is so much talking that no one listens and no one knows what to say. An actual therapeutic task for our age could be named—hearing silencing.

There are, however, places of solitude as well. The most readily available is (still) nature, which many use as a retreat, no matter their underlying idea. Stillness, quiet, silence, absence of people and human products—all of this can have recuperating effects on us. Others choose monasteries or other religious institutions to look for a moment of solitude in their search for God or the divine, spiritual, transcendent. And in every hectic and noisy large city, we can nowadays finds many artists' ateliers and scientists' labs, where people isolate even from the beloved ones to be able to focus all their energy on creative work. As a rule, these places have special emotional value because they bear reminders of some valued moments or hopes of their repetition.

What may seem paradoxical is that some of the most relevant places of loneliness today are the internet and social media. The "social" media destruction of human networks produces the loneliness against which social media seem to be the cure. A recent study (Guntuku et al., 2019) compared Twitter messages of 6202 users using the word "lonely" or "alone" with another group of messages matched by age and gender, but without these words. Linguistic analyses were applied to compare both groups with respect to language markers of mental health and whether these markers could predict the frequency of words like "loneliness" and "alone". Using these words indicated eating or sleep disorders, psychosomatic symptoms, and, more generally, open exchange of interpersonal difficulties; correlations between such disorders and the "loneliness"-vocabulary was high.

When loneliness, when solitude?

Does loneliness have a history? Yes, it does, and even twofold—cultural and personal.

Historic changes started during the Early Modern Age, when the focus on personal, private, solitary grew very quickly, particularly through self-portraits, autobiographies, and soliloquies, but also due to the development of sciences, transportation, and large cities. Western societies are said to favour what has been called (political) individualism (Macpherson, 1962); they developed a language for loneliness which frames this new emotional state (Alberti, 2019). Today, we realise that loneliness can be understood by referring to "individualism" only

insufficiently.[1] Individualism also came with a high price. Two centuries were guided by unrestrained exploitation of nature. Epistemic separations of subject and object, established in Europe since the mid-seventeenth century can no longer be used as sharply, and today we gradually realise that this configuration included a "self against the natural world" and we have academic voices that allow us to think of nature as an actor (Latour & Schwibs, 2018).

As this kind of alarm cries have been raised over several years (Latour & Schwibs, 2018), a similar kind of reasoning is produced by psychoanalytic authors (Bollas, 2021; Lemma, 2005) who include in their subtle psychological considerations a rich perception and attentiveness towards political fights and societal changes influencing patients deeply although they are hardly aware of it. One of the created distinctions is the difference between "being seen or being watched" (Lemma, 2009). The wish to be seen meant to be recognised, to be made real in the perceiving eye of a loving person, and psychoanalysts learned from Heinz Kohut the importance of small children's deep desire "to be seen" and to see the gleam in the eye of the mother when she perceives her child. The word "mother", then, served as a substitute for a small social world in which even older children, adolescents, and adults want to be "seen" in order to realise a contact. The idea is that people are endowed with a kind of *sensory membrane* (Berardi, 2011), which is set in vibration by others' gazes (and other forms of exchange) that cannot be expressed in words.[2]

Contemporary social media extended the possibilities of communication in a hitherto completely unknown way, but they cannot replace the role and function of the significant other. They replace "seeing" by "watching"—but all too often by persons completely anonymous. The "significant other", a central term of the early social interaction theory (G. H. Mead, 1932) was considered the constituent of individuality. It had a forerunner under the poetic name of a "soulmate" or a "companion" (Braten, 2013), someone to be found complementing one's own incompleteness. This metaphor of completing one's self has traces in distant history. It meant the coherent fitting of soul, body, and state, and can be found in the myth by Aristophanes as retold in Plato's *Symposium*. Man and woman in ancient times, Aristophanes tells us, formed a unit, so full of happiness and joy that the gods became envious and split this unit into two. We mention it here to show why "communication" alone excludes the "significant other" and leads to loneliness. "To communicate" has changed its meaning and is widely understood as delivering sheer information via digital media, while Latin *communicare* meant "to share" one's presence with others.

It is also possible to think that the experience of loneliness changes with age in an individual's life. Although we can never reach complete autonomy from others, it does seem that with time our dependent needs become less urgent or less a matter of life and death. In the beginning, another person regulates our hunger, warmth, cleanliness, as well as the state of

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[1] The Japanese example of Hikikomori (Teo et al., 2014)—young adolescents who stay for months or even years in their homes—shows that individualism is only one component on a path to understanding loneliness.
[2] Infant researchers named this "together-knowledge" (Braten, 2013, p. 158).

our nascent self—or its very existence. This function then becomes internalised and turns into a progressively more mature capacity to enjoy time on one's own (albeit in the presence of the invisible form of the other inside oneself). This is, however, a very optimistic (and perforce superficial) description of a process that can go awry at countless corners. Some children indeed grow up in overwhelming aloneness (which we usually call neglect). They can be in the physical presence of parents who are divorced, self-obsessed, depressed, drunk, work double shifts, or they are separated from parents partly or altogether. The consequence of this can be the lack of social skills necessary for sharing inner experiences with others (outward loneliness, as it were) and the incapacity to understand one's own behaviour, choices, or decisions, which can result in a specific type of inner loneliness. Sometimes children invent a phantasy comrade in order to overcome the agony of being alone.

But loneliness can haunt us long after the childhood is over. The largest ever survey about loneliness (46,054 subjects from 237 countries—Barreto et al., 2021) found that it has its most painful effects on young men from individualistic countries and that it decreases with age. So it seems that young men lack some socio-emotional skills to establish bonds that prevent the feeling of isolation that most people acquire over time. Alternatively, it could be that by old age other people become less important and we turn to other priorities or preparations to die.[3]

Finally, loneliness may be more frequent or resonate more prominently at specific points of our lives. At the times of loss, we may miss the beloved intensely and lose hope that overcoming loneliness will ever be possible; while recovering from mental disorders, and especially if stigmatised, we may feel that no one can or indeed wants to understand us; in the cases of political persecution or silencing, victims may feel abandoned even by the one-time closest friends and be incapable of showing who they actually are.

How loneliness, how solitude?

The simplest illustration for a How-question is to think of people who feel lonely—and others have withdrawn from them. To understand them, we will use the so-called "P-theory" (Causadias, 2020), which focuses on the following four elements in order to better analyse culture:

– "*People* refer to population dynamics, social relations, and culture in groups, including families, communities, and nations" (Causadias, 2020, p. 315)
– As already discussed, there are *places* where loneliness is strongly experienced
– *Participation* rules widely determine one's loneliness. In the evening outside a discotheque, the bouncers sort out who is allowed in and who is not; not observing a dress code leads to

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[3] Storr (1988, pp. 168–184) has noticed a specific form of solitude among creative persons in old age, which he calls "the third period", when the works are 1) less concerned with communication, 2) unconventional in form, 3) show no need to convince, and are 4) "exploring remote areas of experience which are intrapersonal or suprapersonal rather than interpersonal".

exclusion; people in certain neighbourhoods never get to have their children attend certain schools or universities
– *Practices* of imposition on young girls in a school class have been carefully described (Goodwin, 2006, pp. 223ff.). Coming from a certain neighbourhood and community engagement with lower socio-economic status are reasons enough for the feeling of loneliness to increase.

Among many possible examples, we will focus here on the so-called lone-wolf terrorists. The name of lone-wolf is an ideological right-wing invention to endow these people with an aura of heroism. However, researchers show that these people announce their deeds and more often than not communicate to their companions via the internet that they are on the way and express wonder that nobody reacts to their threats. School bombers behave similarly: they tend to show their weapons to classmates the day before the action, announce their deeds and talk via the internet. There is a strong impression that they all plead to be stopped.

Power is one of the core features in understanding *how* loneliness (and many other social phenomena) is produced. "Power is executed over people, in places, by practices" (Causadias, 2020, p. 318), and it defines human relationships in many direct and indirect ways, in fine-grained levels and a rich variety of frames, and often results in the production of (hidden) shame. When it comes to loneliness, the role of power has already been briefly mentioned here. The experience of aloneness crucially depends on whether it is voluntary or imposed. If I choose, or even better, organise it myself, it can be an enjoyable solitary time. But if others decide and enforce on me that I have to spend long or unlimited or unpredictable time in a camp, prison, asylum, I may try to protest and rebel but will most probably end up humiliated and lonely.

Treating loneliness, enhancing solitude?

What then can we offer those haunted by loneliness? And are there ways to support or protect solitude, in oneself and in others?

Can loneliness be cured like a malady or is it an overall human condition? Some strongly recommend to "do nothing" (Odell, 2019), to refrain from attention economy, to switch off your computer, not start a day with reading emails—and to regain the ability to observe bees in a garden, to hear the birds sing, to listen to the rain, to enjoy nature's beauty and silence in a forest. Yes—but there are devastated and destroyed landscapes where no birds sing, and no raindrops fall. They are silent but this silence frightens us. No simple solutions and quick fixes were discovered thoughout the history of human kind for a problem as complex as loneliness. Whatever stands opposite to loneliness—friendship, love, family, community, psychotherapy, you name it—are phenomena equally complex to understand and fragile to sustain in one's actual social life.

The other consequence of the invention of modern loneliness, which was previously outlined here, is that in modern days even solitude is often understood in a medical fashion and

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has lost its positive connotation. And this includes treatment programmes. Today there are thousands of self-help books that promise to help readers find their special one; there are also numerous books, guides, and programmes set up to support lonely people in their search for love, and even suicide-pacts arranged by those who do not succeed (Alberti, 2019, p. 79). Practising psychotherapy today is confronted with the strong influence of such suicide-pacts offered in the "social" media. "Involuntary celibates" (INCELs) aggressively fight against the assumed injustice of being excluded from "access" to women they find attractive.

These five questions pose great challenges to scientists, practitioners, and actually everyone who faces loneliness or enjoys solitude. This book is an attempt to shed light on these multifaceted phenomena that are everywhere around us yet remain under-investigated. We hope that the following twenty chapters will contribute to their profound understanding, help the lonely, be it patients or analysts, become better able to voice their loneliness, and support those in search of solitude that may be instrumental in reaching new insights.

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