



# Introduction: Loneliness

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Loneliness is, on some views, a defining experience of our time (Hawkey and Cacioppo 2010). Even before the pandemic, people reported feeling lonely at near-epidemic levels.<sup>1</sup> After Covid-19, the sense that we suffer from being insufficiently connected to others has only increased further.<sup>2</sup> Some of these findings can be explained by technological and social advances: the time spent on internet-connected electronic devices continues to rise<sup>3</sup>; more people than ever live alone<sup>4</sup> and, at least in cities, it is increasingly easy to have many of one's basic needs met without leaving the house. These developments have provided many people with choices and freedoms that were inconceivable even recently, but they have also isolated us from others and thus contributed to a heightened sense of disconnection from the social world.

Yet social isolation is not the only and possibly not even the main driver of the current “loneliness epidemic”. Objective social isolation and the subjectively felt experience of

being lonely are often not reliably correlated (Coyle and Dugan 2012; Perissinotto and Covinsky 2014). If so, it is a mistake to think about loneliness as explicable simply in terms of a lack of objectively quantifiable social connections. This observation has immediate consequences for remedial work: measures designed to help lonely people must pay tribute not only to the number but also to the quality of social connections a person has. Consequently, measurement devices such as the UCLA loneliness scale (Russell et al. 1980) are designed to determine not just the degree of one's social isolation but also one's subjective feelings of loneliness.

Since it is by no means self-evident what feeling lonely amounts to, qualitative examinations of the felt aspect of loneliness stand to benefit significantly from a theoretical reflection on the character of the experience. Many widely used working definitions build on Perlman and Peplau's (1982) Cognitive Deficit Model, according to which loneliness is “a discrepancy between one's desired and achieved levels of social relations”. But what is meant by “social relations”, what does it mean to “achieve” them, and how is the discrepancy between desired and achieved relations manifest in experience? The investigation of these and related questions is vital for a mature understanding of the experience of loneliness and its application in the design of measures meant to improve the lives of people who suffer from feeling alone.

The questions at issue are philosophical in nature. They cannot be answered by means of empirical evidence alone, though such evidence will often be useful in the development of theoretical frameworks that make possible a systematic reflection on what it is like to feel lonely. It is hence surprising that since the treatment of loneliness and solitude by a range of existentialist mid-century philosophers (e.g., Arendt 1976; Jaspers 2011), there has until quite recently only been occasional philosophical engagement with the topic, for instance by Mijuskovic (2012) and Svendsen (2017). This stands in sharp contrast to the rich body of

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cignabigpicture.com/issues/june-2018/new-cigna-study-reveals-loneliness-at-epidemic-levels-in-america/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/press-release/half-a-million-more-people-are-lonely-all-or-most-of-the-time/>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-time-spent-with-connected-tech>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/living-alone>.

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work on loneliness particularly in psychology.<sup>5</sup> It is only in the past few years that philosophers have begun a systematic investigation of its phenomenal and conceptual dimensions and their relation to empirical questions. The present special issue is designed to further this investigation by presenting the first collection of essays on the philosophy of loneliness. It aims to facilitate a dialogue that helps develop a mature theoretical understanding of the condition and highlight its relevance for empirical concerns.

The issue is organized in three parts. The first part contains a historical overview and two proposals that introduce, respectively, the conceptual and experiential dimensions of the philosophical discussion of loneliness. This is then followed by a range of investigations into its phenomenology in part two. Topics included here consider the roles of self and place in the experience of loneliness, the view that loneliness is not a complex emotional experience but a simple mood, and a critical review of the proposal to understand loneliness as an existential feature of human experience. The third part begins with an investigation of the causal function of loneliness in various physical and mental health problems before investigating loneliness in old age, in psychopathology, in alcoholism, and amongst “Involuntary Celibates” (“Incels”). It ends with a study of the shrinking of affordance space during the COVID-19 epidemic. The collection thus presents a much-needed robust theoretical and applied discussion of one of the most prominent mental health conditions of our time.

The volume begins, in part one, with three papers that prepare the ground for the subsequent investigations. It opens with a historically motivated philosophical anthropology of solitude. Julian Stern explores a variety of positively and negatively connoted forms of being alone through the concept of “being-at-one” with others and traces it from its pre-Romantic origins via Hölderlin and other German Idealists to the present day. This historical overview is followed by Philipp Schmidt’s discussion of loneliness as an experiential phenomenon. Schmidt begins by arguing for a pluralist view on which all possible forms of loneliness, including its intentionalist and mood-based versions, are united by their family resemblance. He then focuses on loneliness as an experiential phenomenon and conceptualizes it as a style of experience that undermines social connection. He discusses this style of experience by drawing on cases of people suffering from Borderline Personality Disorder, who often report feeling lonely. The first part of the volume ends with Mauro Rossi’s critical discussion of Roberts’ and Krueger’s (2020) view that loneliness consists in a frustrated pro-attitude towards social goods such as friendship

or love, and his subsequent introduction of an alternative proposal. He argues that loneliness can be conceptualized as a receptive experience that represents the absence of certain social goods as being bad in a particular way. This approach, he suggests, makes it possible to demarcate loneliness from other kinds of emotion and offers an account of the degrees to which a person can feel lonely.

The second part of the volume contains papers that explore further the experiential aspect of loneliness. Matthew Ratcliffe reflects on its phenomenological structure by discussing what it is to experience a place as lonely. He draws on Weiss’s (1973) distinction between the “loneliness of emotional isolation” and the “loneliness of social isolation” to explore how these two aspects of loneliness intertwine so as to constitute a sense of being unable to access a range of social and interpersonal possibilities. This proposal helps clarify, he suggests, what is meant by the common contention that loneliness is a painfully experienced lack of social connection. Spaces also play a role in Axel Seemann’s contribution. He seeks to reconcile intentionalist approaches such as Roberts’ and Krueger’s and relational alternatives such as Ratcliffe’s by arguing that a particular kind of phenomenal self-relation is part of the experience of loneliness on both views. What is experienced as lacking by the lonely person is not simply other people but relationships with these people, which therefore necessarily involve oneself as a constituent of that relation. Loneliness involves a kind of estrangement from one’s social self that is captured by way of the application of a triadic psychological model whose constituents include oneself, other people, and the places, objects, and scenes in which one’s relationships with these people play out. Valeria Motta also considers the role of the self in the experience of loneliness. On the basis of a qualitative study that compared the experiences of loneliness and solitude, she reports that loneliness was described as a deeply disturbing experience of absence that prevents the sufferer from fully experiencing herself, and suggests on that basis that a full understanding of loneliness requires not only considering the social distress of the lonely person but also the self-directed aspect of the experience. The final two contributions to the second part of the volume take it, in different ways, that being with others is fundamental to the human condition and that loneliness is to be understood as a deviation from that condition. Thomas Spiegel draws on Heidegger’s notion of “Mitsein” to suggest that loneliness cannot be exhaustively characterized as a subjective state. Rather, it should be understood as a privation of the foundational mode of “being-with” others and thus as a pre-intentional background mood. This view stands in sharp contrast to the contention, put forward e.g. by Mijuskovic, that an existential kind of aloneness is an inescapable part of the human condition. Like Spiegel, Shaun Gallagher criticizes

<sup>5</sup> For an overview, see Hawley and Cacioppo (2010). There have also been a number of influential psychoanalytically inspired works. See Galanaki (2013) for an overview.

this contention. He argues in favour of a fundamentally interpersonal conception of human existence manifest in the intersubjective processes that make us who we are. On such a view, loneliness is an experience one has when there is a disruption in the possibilities for intersubjective interaction, rather than a deep structural fact about our existence.

The third part of the volume unpacks a range of ways in which loneliness can manifest in different concrete circumstances. Each of these papers negotiates the fact that, when applied to specific life-situations, loneliness cannot be easily explained according to either the individual or their distinctive sociocultural conditions, but arises from a complex interaction between the two. Delving into the known association between loneliness and a range of mental and physical health conditions, Elena Popa takes up this question directly with an analysis of loneliness as cause, arguing that a causal analysis not only enables us to better clarify the role of loneliness but can inform more targeted therapeutic interventions. Turning to the experience of loneliness amidst grief in old age, Emily Hughes takes a different approach, suggesting that the process of aging itself can give rise to feelings of estrangement and alienation that can be difficult to distinguish from the loneliness resulting from bereavement. Accordingly, Hughes argues that, if the loneliness of older adults is to be ameliorated rather than exacerbated in the wake of bereavement, it is necessary to reconceptualise the way we understand subjectivity in old age and the place of older people in society. The complex interaction between the individual and their life-situation is made particularly salient in the contribution on loneliness and psychopathology given by Joel Krueger, Lucy Osler and Tom Roberts. In a comparative study of loneliness in depression, anorexia nervosa, and autism, Krueger, Osler and Roberts suggest that, whilst loneliness is often a core characteristic of depressive experience and can drive disordered eating practices and anorectic identity in anorexia nervosa, in autism it can be seen to result from social worlds that fail to accommodate autistic bodies and their distinctive forms of life. Ulla Schmid further emphasises this complexity in an analysis of loneliness in the context of harmful alcohol use, arguing that it necessarily results from the dynamic interaction of the individual and their social and situational conditions. The sometimes ambivalent role of social and political circumstances in shaping experiences of loneliness

is made particularly clear in the analysis of Incels given by Ruth Rebecca Tietjen and Sanna K. Tirkkonen, who suggest that the affective mechanism of *ressentiment* can transform loneliness into an antagonistic emotion, which is ultimately exacerbated rather than alleviated through the Incel community. Finally, Susana Ramírez-Vizcaya shows the detrimental impact of the closure of affordance spaces during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the way in which the undermining of sociocultural practices led to wide-spread experiences of profound loneliness. Taken together, these papers demonstrate the significance of non-recognition in creating conditions of loneliness, but stress at the same time that, if recognition is to reduce rather than accentuate loneliness, it must be recognition of a *particular kind*.

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