

The Role of Solitude in the Politics of Sociability

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Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

1. Introduction

Between 1902 and 1908, Rainer Maria Rilke – a German-language writer – and Franz Xaver Kappus – a young officer cadet from Austria – exchanged several letters. The correspondence had been initiated by Kappus’s need to find out whether he had a future as a poet. Kappus sent Rilke some of his work, hoping he would get advice and, possibly, encouragement from Rilke. Rilke replied, patiently, in ten letters spread over six years, refusing to pass judgement; he told Kappus (in a nutshell) that the only way to find his vocation was to learn how to be alone with himself:

What is necessary, after all, is only this: solitude, vast inner solitude. To walk inside yourself and meet no one for hours – that is what you must be able to attain. (Rilke 1993: sixth letter)

Rilke’s letters, in fact, talk about a lot more than the question of how to find one’s vocation. They are also about love, marriage, friendship, and the stultifying effect that social conventions have on these; they even contain a sketch of humanist feminism. But all these thoughts revolve around the grand theme of solitude – for, it turns out, an ability to sit still with oneself is indispensable, in Rilke’s view, to getting right not only one’s work, but also one’s relationships.

If Rilke is right, solitude has a prominent role to play in the ethics and politics of sociability – yet, one that has not been much explored so far, or at least not by philosophers.¹ I hope, in this chapter, to make some progress towards considering the many goods to which solitude is constitutive or instrumental, with a focus on the promise that a proper appreciation of solitude holds for combatting loneliness. The overall argument is this: the ability to endure solitude protects

¹ There are some exceptions: Friedrich Nietzsche in, for instance, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1998), where solitude is listed amongst the four cardinal virtues; Hannah Arendt (2003); and, more recently, David Velleman (2013). I discuss Arendt and Velleman below.

against loneliness, and the ability to take pleasure in it it even more so. Since loneliness significantly detracts from individual wellbeing, solitude is valuable to human flourishing. More ambitiously, I advance the (empirical) claim that an inability to appreciate solitude puts one at high risk of loneliness. Furthermore, some scholars are arguing that there is a social human right to those conditions that can prevent, or at least mitigate the worst effects of, chronic loneliness. I content that supporting people's ability to appreciate solitude is one of the ways of implementing this *desideratum* of justice.

According to a long tradition in psychotherapy, the most efficient way to enable people to value a type of solitude, the valuing of which is a safeguard against extreme loneliness, is to give children caregivers to whom they can attach securely. Children who grow up with insecure attachments to their caregiver, are more likely to have relationships that put them at risk of feeling lonely, and less likely enjoy relationships that make them feel emotionally connected. Securely attached individuals, by contrast, should not only be better able to cultivate relationships that protect them from loneliness, but also, by dint of their security, have a good relationship with themselves, one that makes them prefer solitude over unhappy relationships. If so, attaching securely to caregivers during childhood should be part of the ideal of good parenting. Some of my claims are, obviously, conditional; in making them, I rely on the plausibility of psychoanalytical work. But they vindicate anecdotal evidence and common sense wisdom about how an ability to be alone increases the likelihood of enjoying fulfilling relationships.

I start with a brief exploration of the connections between solitude and loneliness, and a specification of these terms as employed in the present essay. The understandings of *solitude* and *loneliness* which I propose are more or less in line with (some) everyday uses of the terms, and therefore by no means extravagant. The role of the conceptual investigation below is not to make progress with the question of what solitude, or loneliness, 'really' is. Rather, it is meant to support the particular normative conclusions of the paper.

2. Solitude versus loneliness

Some dictionaries define *solitude* as the state of being alone, and this regular definition will do for the purpose of this chapter, which is a plea for learning to value solitude broadly conceived. If solitude is the state of being alone, then it is understandable why this term is sometimes used interchangeably with *loneliness*: *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*'s first stab at *loneliness* is 'being without company'. Or else, loneliness may appear to be a subspecies of solitude; according to the same *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, another sense of *loneliness* is being 'sad from being alone'. Indeed, this second sense of *loneliness* is more in line with the everyday use of the concept and, like the first meaning, it makes aloneness a condition for loneliness. It is the concept of *loneliness* as

aloneness that is implied in telling someone: ‘You cannot be lonely, you’re always surrounded by people.’

Psychologists, however, favour a different understanding of *loneliness*, according to which it is a state of longing for an emotional connection with others, and which therefore does not presuppose aloneness. John Cacioppo and William Patrick (2008), who wrote the go-to book on this topic, define *loneliness* as perceived social isolation. But ‘social isolation’ seems too capacious: it is not any kind of perceived social isolation that can make one feel lonely while in other people’s company.² In one important sense, one cannot be socially isolated while in the company of others. Rather, in such cases it is, specifically, the *emotional* disconnect from the people in one’s company that is a condition of one’s loneliness. Indeed, Cacioppo and Patrick themselves seem to acknowledge that the essence of loneliness is best captured by a lack of emotional connection, when they write that ‘if there is no deep, emotional resonance – specifically for you – then none of these relationships [such as friendships or romantic relationships] will satisfy the hunger for connection or ease the pain of feeling isolated.’ (2008: 77)

This, more sophisticated, definition of *loneliness* makes it possible to explain how feelings of loneliness can be experienced by people who actually find themselves routinely in the company of others, with whom they lack a sense of emotional connection.³ This sense of loneliness, having to do with a desire for better emotional connection, and which exists in spite of the individual having social relations, need not be a mere fleeting emotion; it can be enduring and come to dominate a person’s emotional life. According to some psychologists, feelings of loneliness need not correlate at all with the amount of time spent alone.⁴ Throughout this paper, I follow the psychological literature and take *loneliness* to mean a negative emotional reaction – of sadness, or even grief – at the fact of not having the desired level of emotional connection with others.

For *solitude*, too, there are also other, more specific, senses than the usual dictionary one. As I shall explain, these are too restrictive for my current purpose (each in its own way), but nevertheless helpful to explore because they cast light on what it can mean for someone to enjoy being alone.

On some uses, often favoured by poets and philosophers, and in the words of David Velleman, solitude is a state of ‘keeping oneself company’ (2013: 330). Presumably, this is only one

2 They sometimes also describe loneliness in terms of a gap between what we want or expect from a relationship and what we experience in that relationship. This, too, is overly general: I may wish that a relationship provides me with financial security, and regret that it doesn’t, but this won’t cause loneliness.

3 Such emotional connection need not be pleasant – the warm fuzzy feeling of being we experience when we’re on good terms with our near and dear, for instance. One doesn’t feel lonely in the middle of a conflict that is emotionally well-managed, that is, when communication is good and parties are cooperative. Nor does one necessarily feel lonely when one expresses, or receives, regret and apologies for past wrongdoing, in spite of the difficulties of tolerating the emotions associated with conflict and acknowledge breaches of moral standards.

4 Cacioppo and Patrick write: ‘those who feel lonely actually spend no more time alone than do those who feel more connected.’ (2008: 13). For a discussion of the societal duties that flow from taking *loneliness* seriously, see Bouke de Vries’s chapter in this collection.

condition of solitude, while another is that one is alone in the usual sense of being without *another* person's company⁵: Velleman draws directly on Hannah Arendt, according to whom '[s]olitude means that though alone, I am together with somebody (myself, that is)' (2003: 98). Furthermore, keeping one's own company does not require paying constant, or particularly intense, attention to oneself – it is not the same as self-absorption – but it does presuppose some level of objective self-awareness.

This meaning of *solitude* is interesting because it provides a speculative explanation of how it is possible to lack company – to be alone in the regular sense – and yet not yearn for a fulfilling emotional connection to another person. It seems useful to have an explanation of this phenomenon given the widespread assumption that human beings are thoroughly social creatures.⁶ (I shall have a lot more to say about this assumption). On the Arendt-Velleman view, it is easy to understand why solitude can, under some circumstances, preclude loneliness. While the latter means to lack emotional connection, and be unhappy with this state, solitude is to be aware of the only person whose company one cannot lose – that is, oneself. Assuming that one knows oneself and so is capable of correctly identifying one's feelings, emotions and needs, one is emotionally connected to oneself. If, moreover, one is enjoying one's company, it is unlikely to feel lonely while solitary – at least for a while. Perhaps, in order to fully avoid loneliness over time, one needs emotional connection to more than a person, or at least to more than oneself; nevertheless, an ability to value solitude in this second sense of the term provides temporary protection against the most extreme kind of loneliness. But if one finds it hard to know oneself – one's feelings, emotions and needs – in other words, if one does not feel 'connected' to oneself, solitude in this sense invites loneliness. Similarly, solitude in the sense of self-company may invite a strong desire for the company of others (and hence, potentially, loneliness) in cases in which one's own company is painful because one cannot regulate one's emotions by oneself, and needs others in order to tolerate difficult feelings such as loss, anger, shame or guilt. Presumably, just like someone can keep another's company without enjoying it (or intending to provide any joy)⁷ one can also keep one's own company without enjoying it.

The account of solitude sketched above is not adequate as a view about the meaning of solitude – certainly not for the purposes of this paper. But it is helpful as an account of one particularly important kind of *happy* solitude, one that is necessary for effective sociability. It seems

5 At least, active company. As David Jenkins notices, one may enjoy solitude while being alone amidst strangers.

6 And some scholars claim that, at least in contemporary psychotherapy and psychotherapy-influenced fields, the assumption that we are social creatures is taken to imply that intimate relationships are necessary for a good life. See Storr (1988).

7 Velleman (2013: 330) seems to want to preclude this possibility, when he writes – as an additional clarification of the meaning of 'solitude' – that 'solitude entails keeping oneself company, by being there for oneself. And to be there for a person is to intend that one's availability provide comfort or reassurance by being recognized as so intended'. It is unclear to me that Velleman's last sentence is true.

definitionally inadequate not only because it fails to capture some instances of solitude as identified by everyday parlance but also because solitude in the basic sense of being alone can be valuable even when one lacks the objective self-awareness required by the Arendt-Velleman sense of solitude. Yet, it is helpful as an account of one kind of solitude because the ability to be happy with *this* sort of solitude – that is, the ability to enjoy one’s own company – is essential for combatting loneliness. Or so I shall argue.

According to a third sense, on which I rely here, *solitude* is not merely being alone, but being so without minding it. I assume this is the sense of solitude that people generally have in mind when they distinguish it from loneliness. This type of solitude is being alone – in the usual sense – and being, all things considered, at peace without an emotional connection to another person. (Perhaps because one doesn’t enjoy the company of one’s friends at the moment, but also, imaginably, because one is at a stage of life when one has no friends who can provide emotional connection.) Interestingly, this sense of *solitude* makes it incompatible with loneliness. Since solitude, on this account, is not accompanied by dissatisfaction about lack of emotional human connection, it excludes loneliness. But this sense of solitude says nothing about the role played by other people in the economy of one’s emotions. The contentment of solitude, in this third sense of the term, may be due to the fact that one never needs emotional connection to other people (if that’s possible). Or one may be solitary in this sense, because, while one needs emotional connection to others sometimes, one has put this need on hold for a while – for instance, in order to dedicate oneself to one’s rewarding work or hobbies. In this case, one either doesn’t feel dissatisfaction about the lack of company because one is engrossed in one’s activity or, at least, one is happy to postpone fulfilling one’s need for emotional company in order to free resources for one’s activity. Unlike the Velleman-Arendt sense, *solitude* as contentment with being alone does not involve objective self-awareness: indeed being caught in ‘the flow’ of an activity is a paradigmatic example of temporary loss of such self-awareness. The trouble with this sense of *solitude*, for current purposes, is that it prejudges its relationship with loneliness. But some of the good things about solitude which I discuss in the fifth sections have to do with the desirability of being able to temporarily suspend the need for emotional connection, whether to others or to oneself.

3. Relationship goods, social human rights, and solitude

Almost everybody agrees that, in order to lead good lives, people need relationships with other people that include some level of emotional connectedness, or intimacy. I take it that the specific need that is met by emotional connectedness, or intimacy, is to be “seen” by, and important for, another. Emotional connectedness, in turn, is necessary for, and tends to breed, emotional attachment. However, alongside this consensus, there is disagreement about how important such

relationships are, for individual wellbeing, relative to other good things. There is also disagreement over whether everybody needs the emotional connectedness to come in the form of close, long-lasting, mutual involvement, characterised by deep attachment, such as close friendships, romantic love or family relationships.⁸ Following usual parlance from psychology and more recently, philosophy,⁹ I call the last kind of relationships ‘intimate relationships’. This choice of terminology is not an indication that I prejudge the second disagreement. Perhaps some adults can have perfectly good lives while restricting their relationships to more casual connections, and, possibly, such connections can fully meet some people’s social needs precisely because these individuals can experience intimacy through fleeting emotional connections with others. In this case, some adults are capable of full flourishing without experiencing any (deep) attachments.

But more can be said about the goods of human relationships. Over the past decades, philosophers started to become interested in the relevance of these goods to justice; the present volume bears witness to these developments. Even for those who think that we are currently giving too much weight to intimate relationships in the overall picture of a good life, and that casual human connections can be sufficient for a good life,¹⁰ it is easy to agree on two points. First, that during a limited, but extended period of our lives – childhood – we require good intimate relationships in order both to live well during that period and to grow into relatively independent adults endowed with a moral sense who are able to lead autonomous lives. And, second, that for the vast majority of human beings *some* level of emotional connection to others is essential not only for full flourishing, but also for the much more modest standard of minimal functioning.¹¹ Each of these claims entails that the enjoyment of at least some relationship goods are the concern of justice.

On the first count, we owe a great debt to some of the feminist literature in the ethics of care. Morally relevant care, on one view, is given in intimate relationships based on a commitment to the wellbeing of the care receiver (see Ruddick 1998). The most obvious beneficiaries of this kind of care are children, who – according to a consensus amongst psychologists – fail to develop emotionally, intellectually, and socially in the absence of such caring.¹² If human communication and touch are part of “care”, then, quite literally, care creates persons (see Held 1993). If children are owed anything, they are owed the necessary conditions for developing into adequately socialised beings, capable of moral understanding and action and, in due course, of relative independence. Some level of the emotional connection for which people long when they are lonely

8 For discussions related to this issue, see the chapters by Brownlee, Collins, Couto, and Liao in this collection.

9 For instance, Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift (2014) talk about intimate relationships to refer to relationships that have a significant level of emotional connection. They focus on relationships that, in addition to significant emotional connection also display a high level of mutual and long-term involvement, such as the parent-child relationships.

10 For instance, Storr (1988).

11 As illustrated by much psychological research discussed in Brownlee (2020).

12 In support of this, see the extensive psychological literature cited by Liao (2015).

is then owed to children *qua* future autonomous agents. For this reason, some philosophers believe that children have a right to parental love (see Liao 2015; Ferracioli 2015); it is, however, unclear whether children's development, and hence their claims of justice, require love proper or 'merely' a caring relationship that includes the kind and nurturing treatment that they need in order to thrive (see Cowden 2012). But perhaps kind and nurturing treatment either includes, or requires as a condition for its long-term sustainability, some emotional connection¹³. More ambitious theories of justice, according to which children are owed flourishing childhoods as well as the conditions for future autonomy, conclude that intimate relationships are also owed to children *qua* children.¹⁴ On this more generous view, even children who are not going to become autonomous adults – such as children with severe intellectual disabilities or short life spans – are owed intimate relationships on account of the importance of these relationships for childhood wellbeing.

On the second count, relationships that involve some level of emotional connection – even fleeting – have been argued to be necessary for attaining even modest levels of wellbeing for the vast majority of adults of all ages.¹⁵ Chronic loneliness involves significant emotional suffering, and often leads to various physical and psychological illnesses; in virtue of its impact on mental health, loneliness can erode autonomous agency (see Brownlee 2020). Rights, according to one prominent theory, protect powerful objective interests; since people obviously have powerful interests in the meeting or their social needs for some emotional contact, they also have rights corresponding to this interest (at least, again, on this account of rights). Some scholars point out that, since relationships characterised by some level of emotional connection are essential to physical and mental health, and hence to upholding autonomous agency as well, they are also necessary to ensure the securing of various human rights (see Brownlee 2013; 2020). In this case – and, again, within certain theoretical frameworks – the need for some level of emotional contact counts as a social human right, which Kimberley Brownlee has called 'a right against social deprivation'.

As the present volume illustrates, the emergent discussion about social (human) rights to some level of emotional connectedness is framed in terms of rights to protection from the worst kinds of unwanted social isolation, deprivation of social access, and conditions conducive to the experience of chronic loneliness (in the prevailing psychologists' sense). If this claim is correct, then chronic loneliness is a very significant worry if, as some argue,¹⁶ its effects are very disruptive

13 Which is not to say that it amounts to love. Love, I assume, is more robust than mere emotional connection; a distinguishing feature of the former, but not the latter, is that the beloved wellbeing is integral to the lover's own wellbeing, and, for this reason, the beloved is non-fungible. Emotional connection, or intimacy, can exist between people whose wellbeing interests are not intertwined in this way.

14 For instance, Macleod (2010), Brighthouse and Swift (2014), and Gheaus (2014).

15 See Brake (2012; 2017) and Brownlee (2013; 2020).

16 As psychologists such as, for instance, Cacioppo and Patrick believe. They write: "The pain of loneliness is a deeply disruptive hurt. The disruption, both physiological and behavioral, can turn an unmet need for connection into a chronic condition, and when it does, changing things for the better requires taking into account the full depth and complexity of the role loneliness plays in our biology and in our evolutionary history." (2008: 8)

and if it affects a significant numbers of people in contemporary societies. The putative right against loneliness, to be clear, which is the response to this crisis, is not to the enjoyment of emotional connection itself, but to the conditions that are favourable to enjoying emotional connection, i.e. to opportunities to form and maintain relevant relationships. Still, the most prominent philosophical difficulty with thinking about chronic loneliness as an issue of (human) rights is in ascribing, to particular agents, duties to honour the right against social deprivation.

Some duties to create conditions that increase sociality are much easier to defend than others: for instance, a duty to drastically reduce the use of solitary confinement as a form of punishment;¹⁷ or states' duties to create and subsidise cultural centres and social clubs, and sponsor programs that build regular social contact within the meeting of some basic needs, such as the 'Meals on Wheels' program meant to provide not only food, but also company, to older people with mobility limitations;¹⁸ or states' duty to provide each citizen with a voucher or tax-credit to be spent in support of qualifying associations that encourage the formation of relationships (see Cordelli 2015). But the same thing that makes such duties relatively easy to defend is what also makes them, as such, far from sufficient to alleviate loneliness. They are duties to *try* to meet the human need for emotional contact by encouraging sociability: providing ample opportunities for people to meet and create ongoing relationships. However, as I explain above, people can suffer from loneliness even while leading socially active lives. Company, as such, is not an absolute safeguard against loneliness, and the company of those with whom one doesn't have any emotional connection may in fact aggravate it. More than the mere company of others is needed to alleviate loneliness. Some philosophers have, indeed, defended an individual duty to (try to) enter intimate relationships, such as friendships, with those who seem to be left out,¹⁹ and that freedom of association properly understood does not pose a difficulty to such a duty.²⁰ Yet, relationships that can safeguard, however imperfectly, against social conditions and mental tendencies which trigger chronic loneliness, include emotional connection. It is far from clear that one can establish such a connection at will; if attribution of duty requires that agents have control over the performance of what the duty requires, duties to make friends are hard to defend²¹. Even more importantly, the full value of establishing the kind of emotional connection that protects from loneliness may be dependent on the connection being achieved with some degree of spontaneity and *not* motivated by duty.²²

I do not take these considerations to be conclusive arguments against a duty to make friends, or, more generally, to provide people with what it necessary in order to protect them from chronic

17 On this duty, see Brownlee (2013; 2020).

18 For these two proposals, see Brake (2017).

19 See Collins (2013) and her contribution to this volume.

20 As argued in Brownlee (2015; 2020).

21 Along similar lines, Brake (2011) argues that we may lack the normative power to make some of the promises that are integral to the historical institution of marriage.

22 I argue for this in Gheaus (2017).

loneliness – including emotional availability. But the difficulties of defending such a duty, and right, are additional, powerful reasons to consider alternative ways of addressing chronic loneliness. Creating favourable conditions for the appreciation of solitude strikes me as a worthy such alternative. In Section 5, I argue that being capable of happy solitude has particular value in the prevention of chronic loneliness. But, first, it seems worth reflecting on the more general reasons to rehabilitate solitude as a good.

4. The good of solitude

The widespread consensus that human beings are thoroughly social animals, is buttressed by evolutionary biology, history, anecdotal evidence and many of the stories that inform our imagination; but, given the present interest in the role that emotional connection plays for good lives and for the protection of just entitlements, it is particularly helpful to look at traditions in psychotherapy. From its early days in the 19th century, a major focus of psychotherapy was to enable people to have satisfying human relationships, and, in particular, intimate relationships. Freud has famously conceived of psychological health as an ability to ‘love and work’, and some of the most influential schools in psychotherapy continued this tradition.²³ However, with the advent of object-relations theory and attachment theory, the interest in promoting the ability to love has become increasingly prominent, at the expense of the interest in promoting the ability to work.²⁴ In particular, attachment theory, pioneered by Mary Ainsworth *et al.* (1978) and John Bowlby (1980), combines psychoanalytic observations, replicable psychological studies and evolutionary science in order to defend the claim that emotional attachment to others is one of human beings’ basic needs.

Without denying the existence of this need, however, some scholars, even within the psychotherapeutic professions, worry that allowing sociality such a central stage has unduly marginalised those aspects of emotional maturity that do not depend on the ability to sustain close intimate relationships. Anthony Storr, for instance, worries that:

The capacity to form attachments on equal terms is considered evidence of emotional maturity. It is the absence of this capacity which is pathological. Whether there may be other criteria of emotional maturity, like the capacity to be alone, is seldom taken into account. (1988: 11)

If Storr’s suggestion that the capacity for solitude is evidence of emotional maturity echoes non-secular traditions, such as eremitism or monastic living in silent communities, which praise the

²³ Indeed, Freud’s claim is so famous that none of the places where I have seen it quoted bothered to give a reference. The followers that I mention include Erikson (1963), Maslow (1954), and Rogers (1961).

²⁴ For a more detailed, and critical, analysis of this evolution see Storr (1988).

ability to endure solitude as a form of great self-accomplishment. The most likely interpretation of this view, I take it, is that the capacity of solitude is an expression of emotional maturity and, as such, valuable.

Storr adds that we fail to appreciate this capacity not only as a yardstick of emotional maturity, but also a condition for a distinct form of human flourishing. Indeed, his book is an exploration of solitude as necessary for intellectual, scientific and artistic creativity. (He also adds that solitude facilitates other goods, such as learning, thinking, and coming to terms with change.) On a view according to which intimate relationships are the only, or the main, source of human wellbeing, expressions of creativity – and, more generally, engagement with one’s work – are sometimes seen as mere forms of compensation for the impossibility of having what is of even higher value, namely, relationship bliss. Whether or not this sidelining of (creative) work in favour of love is mistaken is, of course, a substantive debate to which I don’t claim to contribute here. But I do assume that work, at least of the creative kind, is an independent source of significant value – a claim to which the philosophical tradition is probably a lot more friendly than the psychotherapeutic traditions. In this case, the capacity to be alone also has great instrumental value as necessary to exercising creativity.

Some philosophers go as far as seeing *moral* value in solitude²⁵ or at least in the ability to enjoy one’s own company. Velleman believes that the latter is a form of showing due appreciation for personhood because, in his words, a:

way of valuing personhood is to take pleasure in solitude. Pleasure taken in one’s own company does not come from finding oneself entertaining. ... The pleasure of solitude comes from simply contemplating one’s capacity for being company to someone – in this case, to oneself. It thus comes from appreciating one’s own personhood. (2013: 9)

Even those who may find this a little too navel-gazing might agree that solitude is instrumental to ethical purposes, for instance necessary for self-knowledge. Rilke’s main piece of advice to Kappus was to spend enough time alone in order to discover whether he really had anything to say that required him to write poetry. More prosaically, Storr (1988: 28) thought that ‘human beings easily become alienated from their own deepest needs and feelings’ because of the social pressure to please others, and to avoid giving offence. Or, one may add, because of a compulsion to avoid themselves by engaging with others (say, on social media.)

25 On of them, that I will not discuss further, is Nietzsche (1998), who thinks that solitude is one of the four cardinal virtues on account of protecting from the corruption of social convention and because he closely connects it to self-realisation.

But perhaps the least controversial value of solitude is in the pleasure it gives to many individuals, who desire and enjoy it; this is, possibly, why many people like, for instance, to go fishing on the weekend or to walk alone in nature. Conversely, an inability to be alone can be perceived as extremely oppressive, partly because of the unpleasantness of loneliness, and partly because depending on others in order to feel well reduces one's meaningful freedom. All this is not to idealise solitude; few, if any, people find it pleasant to be alone all the time. If we were in Robinson Crusoe's shoes, most of us would break down psychologically; and solitary confinement is considered as the worst psychological punishment.²⁶

There is something puzzling here: suppose that solitude is good in all the ways briefly mentioned here, or even only in some of them. What, then, could explain not only the differences in people's ability to value solitude subjectively, but, more interestingly, that for some even very short periods of solitude have high subjective disvalue? Moreover, it is puzzling that even intentionally sought solitude isn't always enjoyable; people testify how having chosen to be by themselves for extended periods of times was one of the most difficult challenges they ever faced. According to the same testimonies, solitude can at the same time be one of the most valuable challenges one ever faces.²⁷ This in itself suggests that the value of solitude is not strictly subjective. And the fact that it is sometimes seen as a worthwhile challenge indicates that enjoying solitude is not an entirely spontaneous accomplishment; to some extent, we need to be encouraged to, and maybe even taught how, to enjoy solitude.

Cacioppo and Patrick explain individuals' varying susceptibility to loneliness – which is a prominent form of dissatisfaction with solitude – by a mix of genetic predisposition and personal circumstance. An alternative (and, possibly, complementary) explanation points to the conditions in which our psychological dispositions emerge in the context of the earliest relationships with our caregivers. It is useful to pursue such an explanation, as I explain in the next section, while considering the most direct relationship between solitude and loneliness.

5. Solitude and loneliness

There are some immediate ways of connecting the ability to enjoy or, more modestly, to stand solitude, to the prevention and alleviation of loneliness. Recall that, on one view, solitude is a state of being alone in which one enjoys, or at least doesn't mind, the lack of emotional connections with others. The previous sections sketched some ways of making sense of such a state: one may be engrossed in a creative activity, or busy exploring oneself, or regulating one's own emotions, or

²⁶ Not only is indefinite solitude painful, but, at least for children, it is incompatible with turning them into full persons. Even more importantly, Mowgli, the main character of *The Jungle Book*, the little boy who acquires personhood although he is entirely raised by non-human animals is, for this reason, pure fantasy.

²⁷ For instance, for individuals who completely retreat from society for a while in order to achieve self-knowledge, self-mastery or religious experiences.

simply happy to keep one's own company. The enjoyment of solitude is incompatible with loneliness. The mere acceptance of solitude as a necessary price for accomplishing work, or better self-understanding or emotional self-control, are compatible with loneliness; but at least as long as one is capable of the activities for which she needs to be alone, she is protected from the despondency that extreme loneliness entails. For individuals who find value in solitude, periods of loneliness are less taxing.

Furthermore, on the Velleman-Arendt view of solitude as self-company, a person who values being alone is safeguarded against rushing into the company of others as a means of avoiding their own; since rushing into unfulfilling relationships invites feelings of loneliness, the capacity to be alone is a partial protection against loneliness. People who can enjoy being by themselves, then, are in a better position to cultivate good relationships with others. Here I assume that sociability generates not only specific goods, but also specific bads. As creatures of attachment, we may think that even relationships that are bad (within limits) are more desirable than no relationship at all, and I'm not suggesting that this thought is mistaken. An ability to appreciate solitude, however, affords people the freedom to postpone connecting to others and hence avoid some of the bads of relationships – or bad relationships altogether. Presumably, those who are used to solitude and enjoy it are, other things equal, more reluctant to trade it for unsatisfactory relationships. They would, for instance, rather 'be alone and be themselves than be with others and be lonely' as the saying goes.²⁸ To increase the likelihood that one will choose good relationships, one may first have to be ready to embrace one's solitude. Such readiness, of course, can still leave a person feeling lonely as well as alone; however, she is better placed to eventually find the right company if she is not motivated by a desire to avoid her own company.

But the most interesting way in which the right appreciation of solitude safeguards against loneliness is by preparing us to relate to others in more genuine, authentic ways – and thus be able to establish welcome emotional connections. To start exploring this, let me briefly return to Rilke's letters, from which I shall quote extensively. In one of them, he puts forward a conception of *love* as a highly demanding accomplishment, and an ideal of love as mutual protection of each lover's private space.

Far from being a mere spontaneous phenomenon, the best kind of love, according to Rilke, is a long and strenuous process:

For one human being to love another human being: that is perhaps the most difficult task that has been entrusted to us, the ultimate task, the final test and proof, the work for which all other work is merely preparation. That is why young people, who are beginners in

28 I'm very grateful to Kim Brownlee for drawing my attention to it.

everything, are not yet capable of love: it is something they must learn. With their whole being, with all their forces, gathered around their solitary, anxious, upward-beating heart, they must learn to love. (Rilke 1993: seventh letter)

The difficulty, it turns out, is to defy conventions about what relationships should look like, and to present to the other person one's genuine self. The role of solitude in self-knowledge, then, is what also makes the authentic encounter with another person possible. One requirement of genuine love is that parties know themselves and each other, and acknowledge the differences between them. While Rilke writes about romantic love, the point about genuine emotional connection extends to other kinds of relationship – romantic or not, long-term or more transient:

...the questions of love, even more than everything else that is important, cannot be resolved publicly and according to this or that agreement; that they are questions, intimate questions from one human being to another, which in any case require a new, special, wholly personal answer. But how can they, who have already flung themselves together and can no longer tell whose outlines are whose, who thus no longer possess anything of their own, how can they find a way out of themselves, out of the depths of their already buried solitude? (Rilke 1993: seventh letter)

The same reflections, in more pedantic prose, could have been part of psychotherapeutic advice, urging people to know and accept themselves – their needs, desires, aspirations and ideals – before forming relationships (especially very close ones, that are prone to more enmeshment) in spite of the difficulties of bearing the loneliness. This may be an ongoing process, if our identities are, to some extent, continuously evolving; if so, we have an ongoing need for periodic solitude. The emerging ideal of human connection is of a 'love that consists in this: that two solitudes protect and border and greet each other' (Rilke 1993: seventh letter).

Rilke doesn't say much about how we should endure the unavoidable loneliness that accompanies the periods of solitude which he sees as necessary to genuine relationships. Nor can he, of course, give any reassurance that the self-knowledge to which solitude is necessary is a guarantee of future satisfactory emotional connections. On the question of how some people learn to be temporarily alone without suffering from loneliness, one learns, interestingly, from the same schools of psychotherapy that present human relationships as the main source of meaning: object-relations theory and attachment theory.

In an influential paper on 'The Capacity to be Alone', Donald Winnicott (1990) argues that being able to bear solitude is a developmental achievement of babies who are allowed to withdraw

from their parent once their physical needs are satisfied, and thus be alone in the nonintrusive presence of the parent. In such favourable circumstances, and gradually, young children learn to internalise the figure of the good parent and thus to bear, with equanimity, periods of separation from the parent, and proper solitude. Amongst infants and small children, it is the securely attached ones who display the greatest ability to separate from the parent – for instance, in order to start exploring the world – and to reconnect harmoniously with a parent after a period of separation (see Ainsworth *et al.* 1978). Thus, in securely attached infants and children, seeking solitude is not a response to a threatening situation – such as a relationship that is perceived as dangerous – but a healthy reaction. These accounts of why some people can appreciate solitude, while others cannot, is coherent with Cacioppo and Patrick’s claim that one of the three variables that determine loneliness is the ‘[a]bility to self-regulate the emotions associated with feeling isolated’ (2008: 14). By contrast, children’s attachment to their primary caregivers – which functions as a (flexible, and changeable) template for their future intimate relationships – can be insecure. One form of insecure attachment is avoidant, characterised by a fear of engulfment; avoidantly attached people put themselves at risk of loneliness by downplaying the importance of relationships. Another form of insecure attachment is anxious, characterised by a fear of abandonment; since anxious attachment tendencies interfere with the awareness of one’s own needs, it invites loneliness in the context of unsatisfactory relationships. Insecure attachment, whether avoidant or anxious, do not in themselves entail loneliness – at least not in the subjective sense in which loneliness is defined here. Rather, my suggestion is that insecure attachment interferes with intimacy, because insecurely attached people either avoid intimacy or, by ignoring their own needs, fail to realise it. Moreover, insecure attachment gets in the way on an ability to value solitude in the right way: not as a refuge from close relationships, which avoidants perceive as threatening, but as a state that can be endured and even enjoyed when one has a good relationship with herself, in the knowledge that other people are, in principle, trustworthy relationship partners.

If this account of how we can learn to appreciate solitude is correct, there is reason to include secure attachment in the definition of *parental adequacy*. This, in turn, is important for determining the conditions under which individuals have a moral right to raise children; philosophers have recently argued that children’s interest should play a prominent²⁹ or, alternatively, the sole³⁰ role in determining who has the right to parent.

To take stock: many scholars and policy-makers are worried that loneliness imposes a significant toll on our contemporaries’ wellbeing; and philosophers are increasingly interested in social human rights, amongst which a right to protection from the worst kind of loneliness. This naturally prompts the search for ethical and political solutions against chronic loneliness. At the

29 As in Clayton (2006), Brighouse and Swift (2014), and Macleod (2015).

30 As in Vallentyne (2003).

same time, according to psychologists, being alone is not necessary for suffering from chronic loneliness. If so, we are unlikely to be able to alleviate the latter merely by designing policies, institutions and public spaces with a view to facilitating people's access to each other. Providing ample opportunities for people to socialise, and even encouraging them to seek friendships with the socially marginalised, are part of the solution, but, in themselves, they are far from sufficient conditions for the emotional connection that we all need. Any such measures must be supplemented by providing other social conditions that enable individuals to have satisfactory relationships. Some of these conditions have to do with cultivating an appreciation for solitude, both as an alternative to unsatisfying relationships and as a perhaps necessary condition for genuine emotional connection. In particular, we ought to provide small children with the psychological wherewithal to tolerate solitude, to teach older ones to enjoy it, and, possibly, to provide people with protected 'me time', by removing social stigma associated with voluntary solitude.

Furthermore, the most efficient way of meeting people's need for connection to others may, counterintuitively, include resistance to any expectations that people *don't* take time for themselves alone, and also resistance to systematic institutional demands of enforced sociability. In this context, a 'right to be left alone'³¹ may complement, and support, any possible duties to make friends or to display general sociability. Systematic forced socialisation is likely to trigger moral worries on a par with those generated by chronic loneliness: both are aggressive assaults to the psychological wellbeing of at least some individuals and, in different ways, the very opposite of fulfilling relationships.

Finally, just as individuals sometimes seek diversions in order to alleviate the pain of unchosen solitude, so could we collectively be tempted to provide people systematically with well-designed diversions in order to combat loneliness. Robots and other gadgets may temporarily address the subjective difficulties of loneliness.³² But they can hardly solve the problem itself, and, to the extent to which they make it harder for individuals to appreciate solitude, using them as means against chronic loneliness is likely to be ultimately self-defeating³³.

6. Conclusions

I have tried to convince you that if we want to alleviate loneliness we should look at the value of solitude. Solitude has multifaceted value, and an ability to appreciate it is a promising, and maybe necessary, part of a strategy to pre-empt chronic loneliness. The opposite of being lonely is to enjoy the company of people with whom one has a good, secure emotional connection. I have

31 I briefly consider this in Gheaus (2018). See also Elizabeth Brake's chapter in this volume.

32 This idea is proposed by Bouke de Vries in this volume.

33 Could an "anti-loneliness" pill be created, to simply rid us of the need for intimacy and, hence, of the very possibility of feeling lonely? If yes, would this be a desirable development? I find it hard to envisage a positive answer to the first question and here I cannot even begin to answer the second one.

argued that important prerequisites of avoiding loneliness are an ability to postpone the satisfaction of one's need for company and a capacity to enjoy one's own company – or, in any case, to prefer it to the company of people with whom one cannot establish fulfilling relationships. To be with others, we must also be able to be without them³⁴.

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