

Loneliness, Grief, and the Lack of Belonging

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Abstract. It seems plausible to maintain that loneliness involves experiencing the lack or absence of something. However, it is less clear what, exactly, is experienced as missing. In this chapter, I take my lead from the phenomenologist and psychiatrist, J. H. van den Berg, who emphasizes a distinctive way of experiencing one’s surroundings. By drawing on some first-person accounts of loneliness in the context of bereavement, I identify a sense of exclusion or detachment from social situations as central to this, something that can equally be described in terms of *not belonging*. I sketch a phenomenological analysis that emphasizes how we experience possibilities. Certain social and interpersonal possibilities, I propose, appear as *accessible to others*, but *inaccessible to me*.

Loneliness and Absence

The nature of loneliness is unclear. Loneliness can be short-lived or chronic, with varying degrees of profundity. People, places, times, social situations, and experiences can all be described as “lonely”. In seeking to characterize some or all forms of loneliness, one might appeal to themes such as social pain, social isolation, and social exclusion (e.g., Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008). However, all are compatible with other kinds of experiences that need not involve loneliness, such as guilt, shame, boredom, anger, frustration, and social anxiety. It is plausible to suggest that the term “loneliness”, as currently used, refers to a range of different phenomena and that it can also serve to emphasize different aspects of those phenomena (Motta, 2021). In addition, it is arguable that the experiences we now associate with the term “loneliness” are historically variable, in ways that reflect changing concepts and narratives (Bound Alberti, 2019).

In what follows, I will focus on something that is common to and central to *many* of those predicaments referred to as “loneliness”, although perhaps not all: a distinctive sense of detachment or exclusion from social situations. This can equally be described in terms of the absence of something else—a sense of belonging to something, feeling part of something. Talk of “belonging” may well encompass a range of different phenomena too, not all of which are principally social in nature. For instance, one might refer to an experience of belonging to a geographical area, to the natural world, or to a place of solitude. Hence, my claim here is more specific: where a sense of belonging does concern something that is *social* in nature, loneliness is incompatible with it. I will suggest that loneliness of the relevant kind

can be characterized phenomenologically in terms of the relationships between possibilities that are experienced as *mine* and others that are experienced as *ours*.

In an interesting recent article, Roberts and Krueger suggest that loneliness is centrally concerned with absence, while also acknowledging that this alone does not distinguish it from other emotions that are equally directed at something absent or, alternatively, at the absence of something. Given this, they propose a more specific characterization: loneliness involves “the feeling that certain social goods are missing and out of reach, either temporarily or permanently” (Roberts and Krueger, 2021, p.186). Hence, loneliness consists in a pro-attitude towards something and, in the veridical case, recognition that one has either lost or been unable to gain access to it. I think it is right to emphasize social goods and lack of access. However, we can provide a more specific characterization of the experience, which distinguishes it from other emotional experiences of being unable to access desired social goods. Which social goods are involved and what does an experience of their inaccessibility consist of? Many different emotional experiences can accompany deprivation of social goods, including jealousy, envy, anger, grief, frustration, resentment, shame, guilt, and despair. None of these are “loneliness”. Nevertheless, this is not to imply that they are wholly distinct from loneliness. An alternative position, consistent with the account I will set out here, is that loneliness or feeling lonely is not an autonomous emotional experience, but a phenomenological structure common to a range of other emotional experiences. Hence, one might speak of the loneliness *of* grief, guilt, or shame. This is not to suggest that emotions of these types invariably incorporate loneliness, only that they can and often do. Loneliness can thus be partly constitutive of a particular emotional experience without being necessary or sufficient for an experience of that type. Similarly, when we refer to the loneliness of situations, such as being alone for a prolonged period in an unfamiliar country, being separate from a particular person, being rejected, or having failed publicly, loneliness can be regarded as one aspect of the larger experience of *being in that situation*, rather than a discrete experience had in response to the situation. An advantage of this approach is that we can identify what is essential to many of those experiences referred to as loneliness, while continuing to recognize their diversity.

To begin with, it is important to make the focus of investigation clearer. Where should we look if we want to reflect on the phenomenology of loneliness? Loneliness is not an intentional state of the form “A is angry about *p*” or “B is afraid of *q*”. Although we might say that C’s loneliness is caused by *r* or attributable to *r*, it seems somehow wrong to say that “C is lonely about *r*”. The reason, I suggest, is that loneliness (or, at least, the kind of

loneliness I seek to account for) is not an intentional state directed at something specific, within the context of a pre-given situation. It is already a way of experiencing one's situation as a whole. To say, "I feel lonely" is also to indicate that one's surroundings appear a certain way, which could equally be described in terms of loneliness. The point applies similarly to certain other experiences, such as tiredness. The experience of being very tired might be said to incorporate world-directed intentionality, insofar as a tired, aching body also adds up to a way of experiencing one's surroundings, which appear distant and disengaging. But, as it is already a way of experiencing one's relationship with the world as a whole, there is no further task of identifying what it is within the world that one is tired *about*.¹

Thus, instead of approaching loneliness by seeking to identify something that is experienced principally or exclusively as a state of oneself, we can consider how the world appears when one is lonely. In adopting this approach, I take my lead from the phenomenologist and psychiatrist, J. H. van den Berg, who maintains that loneliness resides in our surroundings. Although it may be especially conspicuous in our experiences of specific objects, it is not *about* something localized. Rather, it is a way of experiencing our situation as a whole, a situation *within* which those objects are encountered. Van den Berg offers the example of looking forward to the visit of a dinner guest, preparing for it, and then being informed of the guest's cancellation. In resigning oneself to an evening spent alone, one's loneliness is manifest in how things *look*, such as the bottle of wine that still sits there waiting to be opened:

What I was seeing then was not a green bottle, with a white label, with a lead capsule, and things like that. What I was really seeing was something like the disappointment about the fact that my friend would not be coming or about the loneliness of my evening. (Van den Berg, 1972, pp.34-5)

Suppose this is broadly right and that loneliness consists, wholly or partly, in a way of experiencing one's surroundings. What, then, distinguishes it from other forms of experience that do not incorporate loneliness? Van den Berg indicates that a sense of being connected to or disconnected from another person *is* at the same time an experience of surrounding objects as somehow near or far away. Somehow, the two are one and the same:

¹ There are exceptions to this. When someone complains of being "tired of" their job, it seems plausible to maintain that the experience does have a specific object. However, it can be added that "tiredness" in such cases does not involve quite the same experience as, say, "tiredness after a long trip".

The person with us is not another isolated individual, next to us, who throws words in our ear and who remains foreign to the objects around us. He is the person who is either with us or not with us and who makes the degree of togetherness or distance visible in objects, concretely and in reality. (Van den Berg, 1972, p.65)

In appearing distant, the wine bottle embodies one's loneliness. So, the loneliness is not simply a matter of how things look, but of one's standing in a certain relation to them. But the nature of this distance-experience and how it also comprises a kind of interpersonal experience remain unclear. It does not involve the simple presence or absence of something. The wine bottle is *there*, but it is also there in a distinctive way, which I have not yet managed to pin down. One option would be to maintain that, although the bottle appears present, something else is experienced *as* concurrently absent. Alternatively, although the bottle is present, it is experienced as lacking certain properties. However, I will suggest that the experience has a more complicated structure, which can be further analyzed in terms of how we experience the *possible*. It is not a matter of certain possibilities being experienced as present and others as absent. Rather, it involves the following: (a) social possibilities, of the kinds that might cultivate a sense of interpersonal connection, are experienced as available to others but not to oneself; (b) their unavailability is constituted by *other* types of possibilities appearing inaccessible. Thus, central to the phenomenology of loneliness is not merely absence, but the inaccessibility of something due to the absence or lack of something else. This inaccessibility is not experienced as a contingent feature of one's current situation; it is not merely that one is currently unable to access *p* but could do so with effort. On the occasion of one's loneliness, what is lacking does not manifest itself as a call for action; the experience is instead one of passive exclusion, estrangement, or detachment. What one is excluded from varies; it could be a group, social situation, project, social event, society, or culture. What all these cases have in common is that, where there might have been a sense of "us" being able to do various things together, the "we can" has been transformed into "they can and I cannot".

How we experience the possible is a consistent theme in phenomenological psychopathology, a tradition with which Van den Berg identifies. It is also a theme that runs throughout the phenomenological tradition of philosophy, although phenomenologists employ different terminologies and emphasize different types of possibilities. For instance, Husserl (1952/1989) focuses principally on possibilities for perceptual access. When we look

at something, he maintains that our experience of that entity includes a structured system of possibilities for ongoing perceptual experience (or a “horizon”), such as turning the object around to reveal hidden features or touching it so as to experience one or another texture. Heidegger (1927/1962), on the other hand, emphasizes how we engage with things in the context of larger networks of equipment, where the possibilities that they offer and the ways in which they draw us in reflect our practical rather than perceptual concerns. When we turn to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), we find an emphasis on certain, distinctive ways of experiencing and relating to other people. Not only do they offer kinds of possibilities that impersonal entities ordinarily do not. Interpersonal relations can also involve being affected by others in ways that enrich how we experience our surroundings, opening up new possibilities.²

Drawing on this literature as a whole, we can proceed to identify various distinctions to which pre-reflective world-experience is sensitive. Integral to how we experience our surroundings are perceptual possibilities, practical possibilities, possibilities for me, for you, for us, and for them, counterfactual possibilities that appear *as* negated, anticipated possibilities that appear certain, uncertain, or doubtful, and possibilities involving one’s own actions, the actions, of others, or inanimate events. In addition, these various possibilities are experienced as significant in a range of ways, as offering threat, comfort, safety, pleasure, novelty, and so forth (Ratcliffe, 2015; 2017). By appealing to our phenomenological sensitivity to possibilities of different kinds, we can proceed to characterize and distinguish experiences that otherwise prove elusive. This applies to loneliness, which—I will propose—consists in a distinctive configuration of possibilities, together amounting to a sense of being separated or excluded from a social situation.

Now, various different experiences involve a sense that “they can and I cannot”, not all of which amount to loneliness, as when one is the only person in a given social situation who cannot drive, dance, play football, speak German, or eat peanuts. However, what distinguishes loneliness is not merely the *manner* in which one lacks access to something, but also *what* one lacks access to. Loneliness centrally involves the inaccessibility of certain kinds of interpersonal connection. I will not characterize these in detail here, but they approximate what has been referred to as *second-person experience* or, at least, a certain kind of second-person experience (Gallagher, 2005, 2020; Ratcliffe 2007, 2022; Hutto, 2008). In

² Some such dynamic is also identified by Sartre (1943/1989) and Beauvoir (1947/2018), albeit with contrasting emphases on the loss and sustenance of possibilities. See Ratcliffe (2022) for further discussion.

the “enactivist” literature, what I have in mind is sometimes referred to in terms of “participatory sense-making” and “mutual incorporation” (De Jaegher and Di Paolo, 2007; Fuchs and De Jaegher, 2009). Central to one’s detachment is a lack of access to interpersonal possibilities that involve being affected by another person in a structured, dynamic way, characterized by a sense of comfort, ease, spontaneity, and sharing. When having an interpersonal experience of this nature or taking it to be readily accessible, one cannot be lonely. But loneliness is not a simple matter of its inaccessibility. Rather, it involves the absence of wider possibilities for social participation that are ordinarily a prerequisite for experiencing another person in the relevant way. In brief, one lacks access to a “we” experience than constitutes the potential for a certain kind of “I-you” experience. Instead of experiencing certain possibilities as “ours”, those possibilities appear as “available to them, but not to me”. Loneliness of this kind is not a straightforward matter of being physically excluded from social activities. It can arise when one is physically isolated from others and when one is with others but feels uncomfortably different or separate from them. Given this, many people can feel lonely at the same time and in the same place. It therefore makes sense to say “we are lonely”, so long as the “we” in question is construed non-phenomenologically; it refers in the plural to a number of subjects, none of whom feel part of a “we”.³ Sometimes, when in social company, one or more of us just *go through the motions*, while feeling disconnected from everyone else. To further elucidate the relevant experience, I will turn to a specific example: the loneliness of bereavement.

Loneliness in Grief

Pronounced loneliness is commonplace among the bereaved, especially those who have lost a long-term partner. In this section, I will explore such experiences by reflecting on some responses to a qualitative study of grief experiences that I conducted with colleagues.⁴ No explicit references to loneliness were included in the questions. Nevertheless, several respondents stated that loneliness was one of the most difficult aspects of bereavement, or even the most difficult: “loneliness is the worst thing” (#26). What respondents consistently described, often with explicit reference to loneliness, is a sense of distance or detachment

³ That said, if it is further admitted that a “we” sometimes amounts to a singular, plural subject, there remains the possibility of that subject being lonely. For instance, it might make sense to talk of a lonely couple or family.

⁴ The study was conducted in 2020-21 as part of the AHRC-funded project “Grief: A Study of Human Emotional Experience” (<https://www.griefyork.com>). Anyone over the age of 18 with relevant life-experience was invited to participate. The study received ethical approval from the Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee at the University of York. For further details, see Ratcliffe (2022).

from social life. The bereaved person feels oddly cut off from a world that carries on regardless, sometimes for months or even years.

It could be that this same sense of distance or detachment is common to and central to other experiences of loneliness as well. Alternatively, it might be regarded as involving a sense of isolation specific to grief. In selecting bereavement as an illustration, I take the former to be more plausible. Even Bound Alberti, who emphasizes the historical contingency and heterogeneity of loneliness, consistently identifies estrangement and exclusion as a central theme, common to the contexts of psychiatric illness, homelessness, and bereavement. Loneliness among those who are homeless involves “disconnectedness”, while the image of a “glass window” that prevents engagement with the world is a familiar theme in first-person accounts of psychiatric illness (Bound Alberti, 2019, p.59, p.170). The common phenomenological structure consists, I propose, in being (a) cut off from certain possibilities, due to (b) having lost other possibilities that are required in order to access them, where (b) is associated with a range of circumstances. There may be more to loneliness experiences than this and there may also be other ways of being “lonely” that do not involve it. Even so, when present, it is sufficient for the categorization of an experience, predicament, or person as lonely. The experience in question can equally be conveyed in terms of a feeling of alienation or not belonging.⁵

Consistent with Van den Berg’s approach, loneliness in bereavement may be described with reference to self or world: “I can be in a room full of people but still feel so alone.” (#35); “the world was a very lonely place” (#54). Sometimes, it is not the world in general that is referred to as lonely, but somewhere or something more specific: “our garden is a mess as it still makes me feel sad being it in, the garden is too lonely, too empty” (#110). Other accounts refer to loneliness without distinguishing between self and world. Rather, it is a matter of *finding oneself in the world* in a certain way: “the constant loneliness is like drowning in a sea of silence” (#84). Regardless of where the emphasis is placed, the unifying theme is a non-localized sense of detachment. This need not involve actual, physical isolation. People often feel lonely even in the company of valued others: “feel very lonely even though I have an amazing support network around me” (#21); “I feel great loneliness that was/is not assuaged by any company” (#41). What can remain, even when participating

⁵ This emphasis will not capture all of those predicaments that have been referred to as loneliness. For instance, Mijuskovic (2015) instead conceives of loneliness as something universal and insurmountable, stemming from the fact of our distinctness from one another.

in social interaction, is an experience of distance or detachment from the social world as a whole:

Everything goes on as normal and you feel detached from it, isolated and lonely even in a crowd. (#47)

It felt and still sometimes feels that I am a spectator and the world just happens around me, I felt and sometimes do feel at a distance from it all. (#87)

It feels as if I'm on the outside looking in, very often. Again, I see mostly couples and families in most places. It's a lonely place to be, grief. (#84)

I think grieving makes you feel lonely and alone even when you are not and therefore the surrounding world feels slightly alien and out of reach. For me, something in my world stopped, but the rest of the world carried on regardless. It's hard to explain. (#98)

You feel separate from it....everything is going on as normal for them but your world has shattered the worst ever! [...] you feel like you're invisible....people are going on with their lives and yours is shattered....all the couples jump out at you at first....not so much now tho...." (#105)

This emphasis on detachment is consistent with Van den Berg's observation that distance from others is also distance from objects. But how are we to understand this, both in relation to grief and more widely? What kinds of possibilities are experienced as lacking, even as one engages fully in social situations? It is important to appreciate that the possibilities offered by our surroundings are inextricable from possibilities offered by people in general and by specific individuals. For instance, when I look at a building, there is the possibility of somebody concurrently looking at it from another perspective, of their seeing something that I do not currently see. But it does not matter who that person is. In contrast, the possibility of arriving back home and encountering all of the familiar possibilities for interaction associated with being at home may depend upon a particular person, such as a partner.

In both cases, the relevant experience does not involve encountering a system of frozen, unchanging possibilities attached to things, which implicate other people in one or another way. As one encounters and interacts with others, there is a dynamic experience of

changing possibilities. One is affected by one's relations with other people in ways that transform the significance of one's surroundings and vice versa. A sense of spontaneity and novelty is characteristic of certain social interactions, those that are described in terms of feelings of connection with someone and being part of a larger group or situation. There is an ongoing interaction between possibilities that are mine, yours, and ours (Ratcliffe, 2022).

So, we might say that the kinds of possibilities associated with certain, distinctively *interpersonal* forms of experience include the possibility of others affecting one's own experience of possibility. Bereavement impacts upon such experiences in three inextricable ways: (1) possibilities of relating to a particular person in the relevant ways are no longer available; (2) possibilities for experiencing one's surroundings in terms of those relations are no longer available; and (3) a much wider range of interpersonal and social possibilities are inaccessible due to the absence of (1) and (2). Loneliness in grief involves a combination of the three, but central to the structure of loneliness more generally is, I suggest, (3). What is common to various experiences of loneliness, spanning many different situations, is a sense of exclusion from certain forms of social participation that remain open to others (most centrally those that might cultivate experiences of interpersonal connection), due to the lack of other possibilities that are specific to oneself. In the case of bereavement, this involves the absence of a particular person, for whom there is no substitute: "My previous world disappeared because the person I did everything (and nothing) with was no longer there. It became a very lonely place" (#38).

This is one of many ways in which we might lose an idiosyncratic *key* that opens a *social lock*, enabling access to possibilities for participation. Other circumstances, such as relationship breakups and living in new and unfamiliar places, could equally be associated with an experience of this general kind. For instance, in a first-person account of loneliness, *The Lonely City*, Olivia Laing describes the loneliness associated with finding herself in New York after an unexpected relationship breakup. What she lacks access to is not merely interpersonal connection, but also the shared participation that enables it: "What does it feel like to be lonely? It feels like being hungry: like being hungry when everyone around you is readying for a feast" (2016, p.11). There is a sense of being estranged or adrift from participatory possibilities that might otherwise be taken for granted as shared: "I was in the city because I'd fallen in love, headlong and too precipitously, and had tumbled and found myself unexpectedly unhinged" (2016, p.12). Such experiences could also arise due to various perceived attributes of oneself, such as guilt, inadequacy, vulnerability, or lack of confidence. One might also lack or lose a role in a situation, such as a job or status.

Prejudicial discrimination is another source of loneliness, given its close relationship with exclusion. And, of course, there are many situations where one is physically distant from those whom one ordinarily connects with, which are often but not always associated with loneliness.

In all cases, the relevant experience does not consist simply in there being possibilities for others, but not for me. That would amount to an experience of difference, not exclusion. Even where it takes the more specific form, “they have access to *p* (where *p* is a good thing for them and also for me), while I don’t have access to *p*”, it is not sufficient for loneliness. What is involved, more specifically, is exclusion from a certain kind of participatory experience, due to lacking certain other possibilities that are specific to *oneself*, but which serve to open up possibilities that are *ours*.

In the event of losing a partner, one can lose access to all manner of social possibilities that depend in one or another way on the relationship: they are *our* friends; this is the park where *we* like to walk and meet others; these are the films that *we* enjoy watching together. Where one’s various commitments, goal-directed projects, pastimes, and habitual routines depended on the partner and thus become unsustainable, many of the wider social possibilities associated with them may be lost too. A close interpersonal relationship is thus integral to an orientation *through which* one encounters and engages with the various possibilities offered by social situations. One’s own access to possibilities that are experienced *as* available to a larger group of people, perhaps to people in general, thus depends on other possibilities that are idiosyncratic: “I do feel sometimes cheated and lonely and that I have no husband to go away with, accompany me to activities, particularly family gatherings where everyone else is coupled up” (#123).

This dependence even extends to the the ability to withdraw, for a time, from the social world in a non-lonely way: “It remains lonely not having someone around to do nothing with” (#181). Doing “nothing” on one’s own may be a quite different prospect from doing nothing with another person. The latter may involve being affected by the other person in dynamic ways that shape and reshape the significance of one’s surroundings, to be contrasted with an experience of changeless solitude. This is just one aspect of a much wider-ranging loss of access to possibilities: “You no longer feel part of a couple and feel very lonely and unsure of the future” (#65); “My previous world disappeared because the person I did everything (and nothing) with was no longer there” (#38). Numerous participatory possibilities continue to be experienced, but now as inaccessible to oneself: “I worry going

forward that there is no one to walk the girls down the aisle, no one to share the first and subsequent grandchildren with. It's lonely" (#124).

Thus, in loneliness, one continues to experience the possibility of a certain kind of social participation, which might be described in terms of being with a particular person, being with a larger group of people, being with other people in general, feeling part of something, belonging somewhere, or participating in something. Yet, at the same time, one experiences this participation as unrealizable, due to the absence or loss of other possibilities that relate to the specific structure of one's own life. The latter comprise and are experienced *as* one's access to the former. The experience could take either of two general forms. In one scenario, something that was once accessible is now experienced as inaccessible. In the other, something was always inaccessible, in a way that remains salient. In both cases, one experiences certain possibilities as "theirs and not mine, in virtue of something that I lack or have been deprived of" or even as "theirs, but never mine, and never to be mine".

In the case of grief, loneliness also relates more specifically to the loss of a particular person and of relational possibilities that have that person as their object. It thus differs from a loneliness that involves never having been loved and from other forms of experiences where the absence of a specific individual is not salient. Hence, the experience of *personal loss* is importantly different from loneliness in general. Nevertheless, the sense of non-participation that I have identified is common to a host of other experiences, from sitting in the corner on one's own at a social event to feeling excluded from a society or culture. This emphasis on being unable to participate in something, or belong to it, is what distinguishes having a solitary but untroubled evening at home from remaining at home because everyone else got a ticket to the party.

Depths of Loneliness

By emphasizing the sense of exclusion or estrangement, the analysis that I have sketched serves to distinguish loneliness from solitude, while still accommodating considerable variety. "Solitude" encompasses moments where one is alone, longer periods of social isolation, solitary people, and solitary lives. An extreme case is that of Christopher Knight, who walked into the woods of Maine at the age of 20, without informing anybody, and lived there alone for 27 years until he was eventually caught stealing food. In subsequent conversations, Knight reported never feeling lonely during this time (Finkel, 2017). People thus vary considerably in the extent to which, manner in which, and times during which they

seek social participation. Consequently, there will be no straightforward connection between experiences of solitude and experiences of loneliness.⁶

We can also draw a broad distinction between feeling lonely and being lonely. Roberts and Krueger (2021, p.190) suggest that the latter consists of a “dispositional state that has occurrent manifestations”. So, being lonely is a matter of being disposed towards recurrent experiences of loneliness. I accept that there are such dispositions and that those who have them are sometimes described as lonely people. However, there is also another way of *being* lonely: the sense of exclusion that I have described is integral, not just to a passing experience of whatever duration, but to the structure of one’s life, to *who* one is. Some first-person reports indicate that loneliness can involve not merely a transient condition of the self, but a privation of self, of a kind that people often struggle to comprehend and express. Such experiences are often associated with bereavement. With the death of a long-term partner, an ensuing loneliness need not be experienced as a contingent absence or loss of access to social goods. Rather, loss of a person is described as losing part of oneself, in a way that transforms one’s relationship with the world as a whole:

I can’t explain the feeling of aloneness properly, of not being complete but still completely me, of being a mere half but still whole. (#29)

It was like having a limb amputated. I felt like my skin was turned inside out and my nerves were all exposed. I have never felt so alone. (#68)

The relevant experience is closer to what Roberts and Krueger (2021, pp.199-200) call “chronic loneliness”, something that can involve a “narrowing of the subject’s horizons as a social agent”. But, to complicate matters, several different kinds of loneliness experience can be discerned, rather than a straightforward contrast between chronic and non-chronic forms of loneliness. For instance, there is situational loneliness, which involves feeling lonely in a particular place or situation. This is not always the same as finding a particular situation or place *itself* lonely. When I feel lonely in a place or experience it in a lonely way, what I experience as inaccessible are possibilities that were mine or could have been mine. At the same time, I recognize their continuing accessibility to others. However, when a place simply

⁶ This diversity also poses a challenge for any attempt to make normative claims concerning when people ought or ought not to experience loneliness.

is lonely, it is experienced as excluding participatory opportunities in a manner that is not self-specific. There is the implication that at least certain others would experience it as similarly lonely or even *ought to* do so; it evokes loneliness or disposes one towards it. Distinct from such experiences are those that are not tied to a specific context and tend to be more enduring: one cannot simply get up and go somewhere less lonely. But what of cases where *I am* lonely? *Being a lonely person* is not the same as *being lonely*. Even when loneliness endures for a long period, such that one *is* lonely, it can still be experienced as a contingent state of being, attributable to specific events and discrepant with one's longer-term character or dispositions.

What distinguishes feeling lonely from at least some of those experiences that involve "being lonely" is a sense of contingency involved in the former. A lonely situation is experienced as ultimately escapable. In merely feeling lonely, one recognizes the loneliness as a transient emotional experience. In being lonely for a time, due to the effects of some event or series of events, this sense of their contingency may be retained. However, certain experiences of being lonely or being a lonely person lack this contingency. All experience is encompassed by the sense of exclusion and no possibilities point to anything different. It is this pervasive and recalcitrant exclusion that Van den Berg identifies as central to severe psychiatric illness. Setting aside specific diagnoses, he maintains that the "psychiatric patient" in general "lives in isolation" and "feels lonely". A variety of predicaments are characterized by a common detachment from the social world: "The variations are endless, but the essence is always the same. The psychiatric patient stands apart from the rest of the world" (Van den Berg, 1972, p.105). The difference between this and merely feeling lonely is that the world no longer includes any possibilities outside of this "standing apart".⁷ It seems inescapable.

Some forms of experience may involve becoming so detached from the social world that it is no longer salient at all. With obliviousness of *p* comes obliviousness of exclusion from *p*, which is no longer experienced as a cause of suffering (Van den Berg, 1972, p.110). This being so, one might question my own analysis of loneliness, given its emphasis on experiencing one's exclusion. But it is important to distinguish between what we experience reflectively and pre-reflectively, as well as how we conceptualize those experiences that we

⁷ The suggestion that there are different depths or levels of loneliness is also consistent with non-phenomenological approaches that regard loneliness as a slippery slope, which can exacerbate one's disconnection from others, leading to an increasingly profound sense of disconnection (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008, Chapter 2).

do reflect upon. It could be that an all-enveloping sense of exclusion is integral to an experience, without its being an object of reflection. Alternatively, it might be an object of reflection, but something that one is unable to articulate.

However, let us suppose that someone does lack certain possibilities for social participation without any sense of what is lacking. It is debatable whether or not this would comprise an experience *of* loneliness. An alternative would be to consider it as an altered way of being, beyond the depths of loneliness, a place that no longer accommodates the prospect of feeling or being lonely. A certain kind of belonging would then be alien to one's constitution, as flying is for cats and running is for snakes. Even if this is admitted, it remains the case that there are many other experiences of profound and enduring loneliness, which *do* involve feeling irrevocably cut off from something. The relevant predicament is conveyed vividly by following passage from Tracy Thompson's memoir of depression:

I wanted a connection I couldn't have; I did not understand or value the ones I did have. It was a story I saw time and time again in the ward. "Only connect!" E. M. Forster had written, but we hadn't, or couldn't, or never had. There was the doctor, lost in his personal torment, or Heather, grasping for superficial symbols of connectedness, or Luisa, looking for it through sex. It seemed to me the basic definition of any mental illness, this persistent, painful inability to simply *be* with someone else: It might be lifelong. Or it might descend like a sudden catastrophe, this blankness between ourselves and the rest of the world. The blankness might not even be obvious to others. But on our side of that severed connection, it was hell, a life lived behind glass. The only difference between mild depression and severe schizophrenia was the amount of sound and air that seeped in. (Thompson, 1995, pp.199-200)⁸

Then again, it is by no means clear that more profound experiences, where the estrangement is no longer salient, should be discounted as loneliness. Suppose one undergoes such an experience and later comes to appreciate what was lacking: "I was so lonely, or had been lonely for so long, that I forgot what it was like not to be lonely". Again, it is important to distinguish between a life of solitude and one of loneliness. In the former case, reflective access to possibilities for social participation, were it to arise, *would not be* associated with any sense of privation. It might be that one lacks access to be *p*, while others do not, but this is no more concerning than the revelation that some people have access to baseball games when I do not; baseball is not part of my life and the revelation of associated possibilities

⁸ The E. M. Forster reference is to the novel *Howard's End*, Chapter 22.

does not reveal any kind of deficiency in me. In loneliness, however, what is revealed is a previously obscured privation; one recognizes that one was cut off or excluded from something.

We can think of depths or levels of loneliness as comparable to Heidegger's (1983/1995) conception of boredom (although the analogy is limited and should not be extended to all aspects of Heidegger's lengthy, complicated analysis). Heidegger distinguishes three forms of boredom. There is a difference between a salient experience of being bored, as when *killing time* while waiting for a delayed train, and becoming immersed in boredom. In the latter case, the boredom shapes one's experience without itself being explicit. Despite being bored throughout a dinner party, one might immerse oneself in the various social performances without at the same time experiencing or contemplating all of those possibilities that lie outside of them. One thus forgets one's boredom. Yet, in leaving the dinner party, one is still struck by the fact that it was consistently boring. Indeed, even while still there, experience of the situation at least incorporates the possibility of leaving and, in doing so, of then becoming open to other possibilities. The boredom of the dinner party was never all there was. But the third form of boredom, for Heidegger, involves losing any sense of possibilities beyond those internal to boredom. It is the dinner party, but with no exits. This would be comparable to a loneliness that is no longer explicitly recognized as such, a predicament that does not incorporate any salient contrast with anything else.

The parallels also extend to other forms of loneliness. A lonely place is akin to a boring place. We can also *find* a situation lonely or boring, in a way that might or might not be self-specific. In addition, we talk of feeling bored and being bored, feeling lonely and being lonely. Perhaps, though, it is more plausible to think of both boredom and loneliness in terms of a continuum, involving progressive privation of possibilities, than in terms of three or more distinct types of boredom or loneliness. To appreciate the diversity of experiences and the important differences between them, it is indeed helpful to emphasize contrasts between types. Nevertheless, there will also be intermediate forms. Regardless of such details, it remains the case that many loneliness experiences share a distinctive structure. This structure can be integral to a range of other emotional experiences, including the likes of humiliation, abandonment, boredom, feeling lost, and feeling guilty. Hence, I have proposed that loneliness is not a singular emotion in its own right, but a distinctive sense of exclusion or not belonging that is integral to a larger experience of relating to the social world.

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