# BEING PRESENT IN TIMES OF ABSENCE AN INQUIRY ON THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF LONELINESS AND SOLITUDE

by

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*For my grandmother Norma*

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Two chapters of this thesis are slight modifications of papers accepted for publication in *Philosophy, Psychiatry & Psychology* and in *Metodo*. And another chapter is currently under review for *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences.* I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers who provided their expert feedback.

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# Introduction

The year that I started doing research for this dissertation, I went to see a play by Caryl Churchill at the Royal Court Theatre in London, called *Escaped Alone*. It starts with Mrs. Jarret speaking as follows: ‘I’m walking down the street and there’s a door in the fence open and inside are three women I’ve seen before.’; ‘Is that you, Mrs. Jarret?’, someone inside says; ‘So

I go in.'

We see four women in their seventies sitting in unmatching chairs, in a backyard that belongs to one of them. The women have a series of lively conversations. It's a sunny summer afternoon and the conversations go from the most mundane chats to revelations of the women's deepest secrets. The play moves back and forth from these moments of conversation that disappear as Mrs. Jarret steps out of this blooming summer afternoon into a black background, illuminated only by a slim red neon light, where she describes the apocalypse.

There are several interpretations that this play invites us to make. We are taken from one environment to another, from one timeline to a different one. From brightness to darkness; from blue sky to tales of acid rain; from normal to surreal, from a state of being surrounded to a state of utter aloneness. The apocalyptic story may be a product of Mrs. Jarret's imagination or a delusion; it may also be her underlying fear of where the world is going or even the real story of how the end happened that she is telling the audience from some point in the future. The play fascinated me. It evoked comfort as well as instability; it was, as it has been described, both "domestic and wild".[1] However, at the time, what caught my attention the most was Mrs. Jarret's movement back and forth from this warm, cosy garden where she was amongst friends to a dark scenario where she was alone under the neon red light, recounting scattered and disconnected bits of story.

This thesis is about loneliness and what it is like to experience loneliness. The thesis argues that loneliness is not only about disconnection from others but also disruption of self and self-knowledge. I will show how the meaning of loneliness is constituted by an awareness of absence and that this absence is only partly related to other people. It argues that being rooted in a world that is coherent, and the capacity to appear to others and to oneself, are

[1] Clapp, S. (2016, January 31). *Escaped Alone review − small talk and everyday terror from Caryl Churchill*. The Guardian. [https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/jan/31/escaped-alone-caryl-churchill-review-royal-court]

connected. In this sense, attunement to a range of elements in the environment, rather than only feeling connected to people, is something that this thesis pays attention to when it comes to understanding the experience of loneliness.

I will also distinguish loneliness from solitude. In one way or another, maybe without being labelled with these specific words, experiences of loneliness, solitude and adjacent experiences have appeared in our myths, theories and stories since ancient times. When asked to choose between exile and death, Socrates chose to drink the hemlock, showing us how important it was to be in a polis for the constitution of the individual in ancient Greece. In the Timeous, Plato tells us about the myth of Porous and Penia and provokes endless ponderings about the capacity to give and receive love. And this is only in the Western world: examples abound throughout history. My particular interest was how loneliness and solitude are experienced nowadays, in a world that is closer to our experience.

Loneliness has been studied mostly by psychologists, neuroscientist and sociologists. With the exception of one book by Lars Svendsen (2015), up until now, the philosophical literature on loneliness is scarce and only beginning to appear. This thesis is a contribution to filling that gap. Another gap that this thesis looks to fill concerns the approach with which loneliness has been empirically investigated. Loneliness has most commonly been assessed using the De Jong Gierveld and UCLA, and Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale. The UCLA loneliness scale is a 20-item scale designed to measure one's subjective feelings of loneliness as well as feelings of social isolation. It consists of a list of items that participants rate as either O ("I often feel this way"), S ("I sometimes feel this way"), R ("I rarely feel this way") or N ("I never feel this way"). The measure has been revised twice (Russell, Peplau & Cutrona, 1980; Russell, 1996) since its first publication (Russell, Peplau & Ferguson, 1978). The first revision was designed to counter the possible effects of response bias in the original scale, and the second to simplify the wording.

The scale is a psychological method for studying experiential states. In psychology a state is distinguished from a trait and characterized as being temporary and dynamic based on varying internal and external factors, as Lauren Reineman-Jones (2013) notes, following Chaplin et al. (1988). For studying such states, psychological methods rely on self-report questionnaire data that are practical, easily quantifiable and easy to interpret. This method allows for large amounts of data to be collected and analysed in a timely manner (McDonald 2008). Despite these advantages, self-report questionnaires present some drawbacks. Due to the subjective nature of the responses, these can be influenced by the participants' willingness to participate. There is also the possibility of response biases, acquiescent responding, as well as extreme responding (Paulhus & Vazire, 2007). All these can have a significant effect on the reliability and validity of these measures. In some studies, self-report state questionnaires are given after a stimulus is presented. Consequently, memory errors that cause misleading responses may occur due to factors that intervene between the stimulus and the administration of the questionnaire (Tourangeau, 1999). Therefore, although self-report questionnaires are practical and are consistently used by researchers, they have some limitations (Reineman-Jones et al., 2013).

To the list of disadvantages that the method itself presents, we can add others specifically related to using this method to study loneliness. The first one is related to using self -report questions that require people to respond to statements such as "I am a lonely person". Not everyone who is lonely labels herself as a lonely person. In an exhaustive review of the gender difference in loneliness research in adults, Borys and Perlman (1985) observed that women are more likely than men to admit that they feel lonely. The authors revealed that studies using self-labelled measures of loneliness will provide results suggesting that women report that they are lonelier than men. However, sex differences in loneliness are much less

frequent when measures of loneliness are used that do not include the word "lonely," or those that are labelled as lonely. A second issue is that the UCLA loneliness scale is a unidimensional/global measure of loneliness. It is argued that assessments that regard the experience as unidimensional are inadequate because they do not consider the complex relationships between the various forms of loneliness and other phenomena and turn a blind eye to studies that suggest loneliness is a multidimensional phenomenon (e.g. Marangoni & Ickes, 1989; Goossens & Beyers, 2002; DiTommaso & Spinner, 1997; Hoza, Bukowski, & Beery, 2000). These studies show how different social relationship deficiencies give rise to different forms of loneliness.

Despite all these drawbacks, there is value in the UCLA scale, which was the first to acknowledge the importance of assessing loneliness. It helped demonstrate that although loneliness is correlated with measures of negative affect, social risk-taking and affiliative tendencies, it is nonetheless a distinct psychological experience (Russell, Peplau & Cutrona, 1980). More importantly, it acknowledged the value of first-person reports in the assessment. The scale could be revised, updated and improved or new scales can be developed since, at the moment, it most assesses social disruption.

There are some benefits to using this sort of study for assessing loneliness. However, it is fundamental to make a distinction. In UCLA scale type of studies, first-person reports are elicited for the purpose of *making an assessment* and not for the purpose of *understanding the nature of the experience*. The assessment presupposes a clear and comprehensive understanding of the nature of the experience that we are assessing. Do we have a clear and comprehensive understanding of the nature of the experience of loneliness? The study of the first-person perspective is important both for assessment and understanding, but the purposes are different. What this implies is that the disadvantages listed do not relate to the value of exploring subjective experience *per se*. Most of the criticism and disadvantages listed above

that are often directed at self-report data in general only apply to a specific way of eliciting self-reports: namely, psychological methods that rely on self-report questionnaires. To have clarity about this allows us to better appreciate the value of the study of self-reports.

Goossens and Beyers (2002) have already suggested that, given the subjective nature of the phenomenon, it would seem that self-report measures are the best method of data collection. Researchers have argued that future research may benefit from employing multi-method approaches such as observational techniques, and multiple informants (i.e., self-as-well-as-other-reports). So, I am not the first to claim that first-person reports are important for the study of loneliness. But in what manner these sources of data are best approached is a key element here. My research started with a review of existing work on loneliness and a careful analysis of definitions and influential characterizations. The following are the most influential characterizations of the experience of loneliness in psychology:

> [Loneliness is] an exceeding unpleasant and driving experience connected with inadequate discharge of the need for human intimacy, for interpersonal intimacy (Stack Sullivan, 1953, p. 290)

> Loneliness is a painful subjective emotional state occurring when there is a discrepancy between desired and achieved patterns of social interaction. It is thus conceptualized as an entirely subjective state, not necessarily dependent on the quantity of someone's social relations (Peplau & Perlman, 1982, p. 31)

Philosophical emotion theories have extensively dwelt on (1) intentionality, (2) the role of bodily feelings, (3) the objects of emotion, and (4) the evaluative aspect of emotions. So, a philosophical lens on these characterizations illuminates the following common factors in these definitions:

1. They suggest that loneliness has an intentionality. However, they differ in identifying the direction of the intentionality and the intentional object.

2. They claim that loneliness involves a *bodily felt aspect*.
3. They highlight that loneliness involves a sense of inadequate contact.
4. They characterize loneliness as an unpleasant, painful experience to have. This highlights the evaluative aspect of the experience.

However, there was more to the experiences of loneliness that I was interested in studying. These were described with a range of expressions, from aesthetic to physical sensations. And it is often the case that different expressions are combined to describe the experience. I was interested in understanding what exactly someone means when they say they feel lonely; that is, in understanding the experiential aspects of these descriptions. And, for this, it was important to be able to answer questions such as: what does it imply to study self-reports in a way that enhances our understanding of the experiential aspects of loneliness and solitude? H aving considered the limitations of the traditional psychological approaches, it was also important to consider how we can study experiences in their own terms as experiences. These are traditionally regarded as phenomenological questions.

In what follows, I will briefly outline the structure of the thesis and the content of each chapter. **Chapter 1: Key Concepts: Loneliness**[2] reviews the most dominant definitions of loneliness and addresses some of their underlying assumptions and problems. The growing awareness that social relations play a fundamental role in psychological well-being has led mental health researchers to integrate work on loneliness and social support. This has influenced most of the definitions we have of loneliness nowadays. Thus, when defining loneliness, there is a tendency to focus on social distress, which is just one aspect of the experience. Various disciplines have provided different definitions: some have focused on the

[2] This is a paper accepted for publication in *Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology* to be published in March 2021.

multifaceted nature of loneliness (addressing the interaction between specific behaviours, emotions and thoughts), while others have focused primarily on cognitive aspects. In such definitions, loneliness is also regarded as a subjective experience, but the subjective aspect is often described as something 'private', which obscures the experiential features that are essential to loneliness. The chapter proposes a starting point for arriving at better definitions and distinguishing between types of loneliness, focusing on the temporal, embodied and attentional dimensions of the phenomenon.

After persuading you of the need of a novel approach to study loneliness, I present a way to address such need in **Chapter 2: Absence of Other and Disruption of Self: an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Meaning of Loneliness in the Context of Life in a Religious Community**.[3] This chapter presents the selected analyses from the study I conducted to explore the phenomenology and meaning of loneliness, through interviews conducted with a group of religious women. I provide some background and introduction to the principles and processes underpinning Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is an idiographic approach to qualitative research, widely used in psychologically-informed studies that aim to understand the meaning and context of specific experiences. The study extends the rationale of previous studies for more nuanced and exploratory research, in order to investigate the meaning of solitude and loneliness. While there are descriptive accounts of loneliness in the literature, the meaning and context of the phenomenon is less explored, particularly in relation to those aspects that may be volitional or positive (such as solitude). These experiences are multifaceted and deserve to be fully and properly addressed in their own right, using a methodology that considers the different layers of meaning and context.

[3] This chapter is a revised version of an invited contribution that I co-authored with Michael Larkin, currently under review for *Philosophy and the Cognitive Sciences* on the topic of *Working with others' experience: theory, practice and application.*

**Chapter 3: Absence of Other and Absence of Self: Intersubjectivity and Intentionality in the experience of Loneliness** offers philosophical insights into the results of the study. The results extend some prevailing views about the experience of loneliness. Loneliness has been connected to the perceived absence of specific people in one or more of three different dimensions of our attentional space: *intimate, relational* or *collective* (Cacioppo et al., 2015; Hawkley, Gu, Luo & Cacioppo, 2012). However, the results indicate that loneliness was not always directed at the perceived absence of specific people. Experiences of absence were also articulated in other ways by our participants. This suggests that loneliness includes experiencing *different* kinds of absences. The participants expressed loss of other people as well as loss of experience, loss of one aspect of their own selves and even their own sense of self. The chapter suggests that the experience of absence may be an important, encompassing aspect of loneliness. In this chapter I develop theoretical accounts for the main claims made in Chapter 2: (1) *in loneliness, we experience a connection between the experience of absence, and the disruption of self-experience*; (2) *loneliness arises in discrepancy and incongruence; and* (3) *absence-in-presence distinguishes loneliness from other experiences that involve absence, such as social isolation.*

**Chapter 4: Solitude as a Positive Experience: Empowerment and Agency**[4] includes some of the results of the analysis exploring the phenomenology and meaning of solitude. The initial distinction between loneliness and solitude characterizes one as negative and the other positive. This chapter considers what characteristics distinguish solitude from loneliness and what makes solitude a positive experience. To answer these questions, I review some of the literature on the benefits of solitude, focusing on freedom, creativity, and spirituality. I highlight two findings in particular. The first is that solitude is characterized by presence,

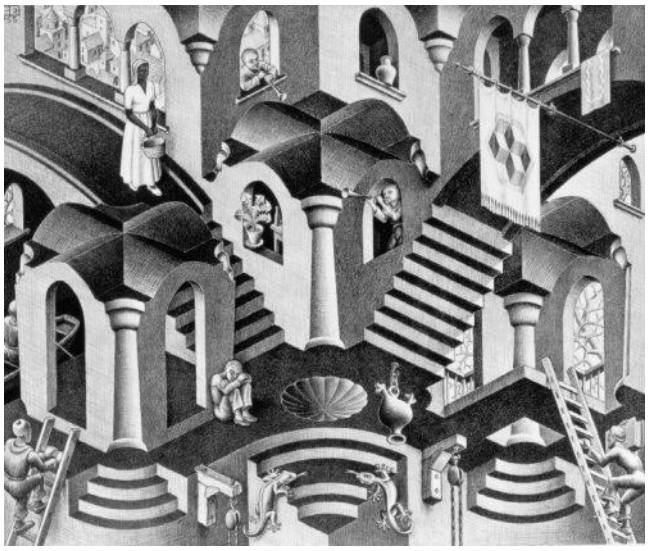
[4] This chapter is a slightly revised version of a paper co-written with Lisa Bortolotti forthcoming in the journal *Methodo* on *Positive Feelings on the Border between Phenomenology, Psychology and Virtue Ethics.*

whereas loneliness is characterized by absence; and the second is that solitude can contribute to a sense of empowerment that enables agents to pursue and achieve goals they find valuable. I argue that the relationship between agent and environment is important in determining the quality of experiences of solitude. In particular, we find that solitude may support a person's sense of agency, expanding the possibilities for action that a person has, and creating the conditions for authenticity.

As I mentioned, the results of the study point to solitude in connection to experiences of presence in opposition to the absence experienced in loneliness. **Chapter 5: Fragility of Presence and the Power of Withdrawing from the World and Connecting with Oneself** explores the nature of the experience of presence in solitude. The results indicate that these experiences lead to a deeper sense of connection. The analysis presents different levels and dimensions of connections. Connections can be established with the social world, with nature, and with God. Relationships with the social world are determined by roles and it is possible to withdraw from them in different ways. Unlike in the experience of loneliness, there is no perception of absence in this withdrawal. The natural world provides a possibility to reconnect with other possibilities of being that are not determined by the previously established social Other. It is through this detachment that another space is created. This space leads to openness, freedom, and authenticity of self and to a feeling of a deeper connection. Just as I did in chapter 2 with loneliness, in this chapter I develop theoretical accounts for the main claims that resulted from the analysis of the experience of solitude: (1) *in solitude there is a connection between the experience of presence and appearing in the world as a unique agent. However, the experience of presence entails more than agency*; (2) *the change of environments that happens in solitude allows for individuals to display different and particular aspects of their self. This not only reinforces their sense of autonomy but also widens their perception of possibilities of being; (3) solitude allows for a sense of connection with oneself; and (4) solitude allows for an*

*experience of silence where one has a voice.*

Finally, in **Chapter 6: Revisiting an Affordance-based Account for Distinguishing Loneliness, Solitude and Social Isolation**, I consider a recent proposal by Shaun Gallagher and Bruce Janz (2019) that presents an affordance-based account for explaining the distinction between what they call negative and beneficial effects of solitude. They propose that autonomy is what distinguishes the two types of solitude and autonomy is understood in terms of affordances. I analyse their perspective and argue that such accounts provide very good grounds for addressing fundamental aspects of the experience affected by loneliness. However, affordance-based accounts need to be refined to properly address the experience and to allow for a clear distinction between loneliness, social isolation and solitude. A diminished scope for action may be (but is not necessarily) at the onset of loneliness or may be the result of chronic loneliness and this, in turn, will affect a person's autonomy. However, lonely people experience loss and absence that can be so pervasive that it occurs even when possibilities for action do not diminish. And perceptions of impossibilities for action can cause experiences of loneliness. I argue that it is this more fundamental relationship between affordances and absences that is at the basis of the experience of loneliness and determines our sense of autonomy.



M.C Escher, *Convex and Concave,* 1955

# 1

# Key Concepts: Loneliness[5]

## 1.1. Abstract

Loneliness is one of the least conceptualized psychological phenomena (Fromm-Reichman, 1959). The growing awareness that social relations play a fundamental role in psychological well-being has led mental health researchers to integrate work on loneliness and social support. This has influenced most of the definitions we have of loneliness nowadays. Thus, when defining loneliness, there is a tendency to focus on social distress, which is just one aspect of the experience. Various disciplines have provided different definitions: some have focused on the multifaceted nature of loneliness (addressing the interaction between specific behaviours, emotions and thoughts), while others have focused primarily on cognitive aspects. In such definitions, loneliness is also regarded as a subjective experience, but the subjective aspect is often described as something 'private', which obscures the experiential features that are essential to loneliness. In this chapter, I review the most dominant definitions of loneliness and address some of their underlying assumptions and problems. I propose that a starting point for arriving at better definitions and distinguishing between types of loneliness is to focus on the temporal, embodied and attentional dimensions of the phenomenon.

## 1.2. Introduction

The experience of loneliness extends from the temporary separation from loved ones to a more permanent state of disconnection associated with chronic mental or physical illness. Since acute loneliness often appears alongside diagnoses such as depression and schizophrenia, researchers have tended to focus on these disorders rather than the experience of loneliness

[5] This chapter is a slight modification of a paper published in *Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology*..

itself. Psychiatrist Frieda Fromm-Reichmann (1959/1990) was the first to consider loneliness as a psychiatric condition, and to acknowledge the challenge in conceptualizing the term:

> The writer who wishes to elaborate on the problems of loneliness is faced with a serious terminological handicap. Loneliness seems to be such a painful, frightening experience that people will do practically everything to avoid it. This avoidance seems to include a strange reluctance on the part of the psychiatrist to seek scientific clarification of the subject ... Thus loneliness is one of the least conceptualized psychological phenomena. (Fromm-Reichmann, 1959, p. 1)

At this time, the term 'loneliness' was used to refer to a broad range of experiences, such as isolation and solitude.[61] Over recent decades, there has been an increasing amount of empirical research on loneliness (e.g. Perlman & Peplau, 1982; Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Willock, Bohm & Curtis, 2012) involving a range of definitions. Distinctions have been made between loneliness and social isolation, and between loneliness and solitude. Many contemporary researchers acknowledge that loneliness and social isolation are different constructs. However, this theoretical distinction is not always fully reflected in empirical research on loneliness, let alone in interventions to alleviate it.

There are good reasons to clarify the concept of loneliness. Loneliness has adverse effects on physical and mental health. It is a risk factor for morbidity and mortality in humans (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008, p. 108). Loneliness can be transient – a consequence of external circumstances, such as the loneliness that results from a bereavement, a change of city or social circles, or distance from friends, family or partners. Loneliness can also be "a chronic distress without redeeming features" (Weiss, 1973, p. 15). These observations have raised questions about whether loneliness should be characterized as a pathology in its own right, and whether alleviating loneliness should be a key focus for clinicians (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006).

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[1] A reference to historical changes in the meaning of loneliness can be found in Alberti (2019).

There are different definitions proposed within different disciplines. We find two tendencies: either loneliness is defined from a single disciplinary perspective, such as the psychological (Perlman & Peplau, 1982), sociological (Bowman, 1955; Riesman, Glazer & Denney, 1961; Slater, 1976), neuroscientific (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008), or philosophical (Moustakas, 1961; Svendsen, 2015); or it is defined from a multidisciplinary approach (e.g. Mijuskovic, 2012; Willock, Bohm & Curtis, 2012). Below, I raise concerns about some of the prevailing definitions of loneliness, focusing on philosophical aspects of the concepts of loneliness that are being overlooked. My suggestion is that exploring them will have implications for future research on different types of loneliness as well as on different *types of research* on loneliness.

### 1.2. Defining Loneliness

A review of the loneliness literature (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006) provides examples of a range of definitions: those with a clinical focus; those based on empirical psychological research; and those connecting loneliness with social relationships and the human need to belong. These definitions are the most commonly agreed upon in the literature and can be organized into five different theoretical perspectives. I draw mainly on Heinrich and Gullone's work here, but also introduce some distinctions inspired by previous, alternative frameworks and theoretical distinctions (after Perlman & Peplau, 1982; Marangoni & Ickes, 1989).

The first type of definition is based on *social needs*. Researchers underline the role that early influences play in generating and maintaining loneliness (Fromm-Reichmann, 1959; Sullivan, 1953; Weiss, 1973). The cause of loneliness, according to this approach, is the absence of relationships "which are not necessarily intimate or confidant in nature, but rather enable the meeting of one's inherent social needs such as attachment, social integration,

nurturance, reassurance of worth, reliance alliance, and guidance" (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006, p. 698). Sullivan (1953) is regarded as a predecessor to the social needs approach, having proposed a direct relationship between subjective feelings of loneliness and objective social deficits (Marangoni & Ickes, 1979). This perspective is also inspired by Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory, which proposes that secure early bonds are necessary for developing closeness in social bonding later in life. If early disturbances in attachment bonds occur, this can lead to personal traits that impede relationship development (Perlman & Peplau, 1982). However, Heinrich and Gullone argue that situational factors at any stage in life, such as death, divorce or relocation, can also be regarded as causes of loneliness or factors that cause it to persist, because, as people transition into different life stages, attachment figures change from parents to friends, partners and peers.

The second type of definition is based on *cognitive discrepancy*. Although it emphasizes the affective consequences of loneliness, this type of definition proposes that cognitive processes are its cause (Peplau & Perlman, 1982), defining it as the aversive state experienced when there is a discrepancy between the interpersonal relationships a person *wishes* to have, and those that she *perceives* she has (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). The cognitive discrepancy perspective draws on attribution theory, suggesting that, in their attempts to understand the causes of their own and other's actions, lonely people attribute causality. It is the manner in which they attribute causality that affects their psychological state (Murphy & Kupshik, 1992). Furthermore, Shaver, Furman and Buhrmester (1985) have shown that, compared to their non-lonely and transiently-lonely counterparts, chronically-lonely individuals hold very high expectations of interpersonal relationships. Therefore, on this view, changes in either one's actual or desired social relationships give rise to loneliness, and attitudes and attributions mediate this relationship.

In the classification by Marangoni and Ickes, the cognitive discrepancy hypothesis is included in the broader category of *cognitive processes approach.* The category also comprises attribution theory and the links between certain attribution styles and the trait-lonely (as appears in Shaver; 1985). The key distinct element here is that cognitive discrepancy requires the lonely person to perceive their social relationships as unfulfilling. However, Marangoni and Ickes, following Young (1982), point out that when it comes to people recognizing that they are lonely, there are individual differences in levels of awareness. "Young deviates from the 'perceived-discrepancy' model by tentatively classifying as lonely those individuals who exhibit symptoms of distress that are associated with unsatisfactory social relationships, even when such individuals are *unaware of a discrepancy* between their actual and desired social relationships" (Marangoni & Ickes, 1989, p. 104). Many studies require that people self-report as lonely and this may leave a whole group (and perhaps type) of lonely people neglected. The topic of self-ascription is related to the definition of loneliness. Researchers have pondered on the type of terminology to include in the measuring scales. De Jong Gierveld, Van Tilburg and Dykstra (2018) note that some versions of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau & Ferguson, 1978) and the de Jong Gierveld loneliness scale (de Jong Gierveld & Kamphuis, 1985; de Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 1999) exclude the term 'lonely', or are worded in a way that includes both lonely and non-lonely directions (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980) with the aim of avoiding the scores being affected by the negative connotations of the term. We might wonder whether we can rely on people using the term 'lonely' to describe themselves. Different language may change what is being measured and sometimes more than one scale is used in studies for this precise reason.[72]

The third type of definition derives from the *interactionist approach* to loneliness. According to this view, character traits (e.g. social anxiety, shyness, introversion) interact with

[2] For a complete discussion of this, see de Jong Gierveld, Van Tilburg and Dykstra (2018).

situational (e.g. hospitalization, relocation or changes in income (Blai, 1989; Hymel, Tarulli, Hayden Thompson & Terrell-Deutsch, 1999; Killeen, 1998)) and cultural factors (e.g. expectations regarding couple relationships behaviours (Rokach, Lackovic-Grgin, Penezic & Soric, 2000) to shape our social relationships. Expectations regarding the roles people should play also have an influence (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006; Weiss, 1982; Yang and Clum, 1994).

Heinrich and Gullone's (2006) definition of loneliness belongs to a fourth group of definitions and presents loneliness as indicative of deficits in social relationships. This definition is based on the fact that humans are social beings with an essential need to belong. When this need is not met, disruptive experiences (such as loneliness) emerge. Here, loneliness is rooted in specific perceptions, evaluations and responses to interpersonal reality (Jones, 1982), and manifests itself through behaviours, feelings and cognitions that are closely related to one another. As Heinrich and Gullone put it, the prototypical lonely person has "negative feelings such as desperation, depression, impatient boredom, and self-deprecation; negative attitudes about oneself, other people, and about the causes of events; as well as passive, self-absorbed, and ineffective social behaviour" (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006, p. 712). What makes Heinrich and Gullone's definition different from the cognitive-process or cognitive-discrepancy approach? Loneliness includes a cluster of attitudes, cognitions and behaviours.

The fifth type of definition regards loneliness as a consequence of the universal human need to belong and therefore sees it as an inevitable part of human existence. As such, loneliness can be experienced by everyone irrespective of age, economic background, social, health or marital status (e.g. Frie, 2012; Mijuskovic, 2012; Neto & Barros, 2000; Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Rotenberg, 1999a). Some authors go as far as to suggest that "failure to experience loneliness appropriately calls into question one's very nature as a social being" (Wood, 1986, p. 184). This approach has also been called existentialist to reflect Moustakas's position (1961; 1972) that "true loneliness stems from the reality of …facing life's ultimate

experiences (i.e. birth, death, change, tragedy) [and] can be a creative force" (Peplau and Perlman, 1982, p. 126).

What all these definitions have in common is that loneliness is defined in terms of social relationships, and the nature of humans as social beings. Be it an unmet need for social relations, a disfunction in cognition, perception or behaviour related to social relations, a marker of a deficit in social relations, or even a necessary experience, defining loneliness primarily in terms of social relationships raises some important issues. First, if we define loneliness in terms of social relationships, loneliness becomes primarily and, in some cases *solely,* connected with sociality. This has implications for research into loneliness: researchers are led to seek explanations for why people do not achieve meaningful connections with others and may disregard other important aspects of the phenomenon, such as the temporal dimension of loneliness, its connection with attention, and how absence is experienced.

Second, defining loneliness based on social relations typically involves conceptualizing loneliness as a subjective and 'private' experience that does not reflect an *outside* reality. This places researchers in muddy terrain. As Roger Frie put it, "the challenge is that when selfhood is conceptualized as relational or social in nature, it becomes difficult to account for our basic sense of aloneness and states of loneliness. Similarly, when selfhood is viewed as separate and isolated, it becomes hard to account for the relational nature of human experience" (Frie, 2012, p. 36). Making a sharp separation between the subjective, inner experience and the objective social realm not only gives rise to a tension when trying to define loneliness, but also leads us to propose abstract solutions to the problem of loneliness:

> Every person's experience of loneliness is unique, and so 'being lonely' will not have exactly the same meaning for everyone. [...] Unfortunately, while loneliness can be objectively defined, it is a subjective experience which cannot be observed directly by researchers and clinicians (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). So in concluding that 'I feel lonely,' or 'my client is lonely,' one must necessarily summarize a

> constellation of feelings, thoughts, and behaviours (Horowitz, French & Anderson, 1982; Peplau, Miceli, & Morasch, 1982). Thus, loneliness is an abstract summary of a cluster of specific feelings, thoughts, and behaviours (Horowitz, French & Anderson, 1982). (Heinrich and Gullone, 2006, p. 704)

The so-called 'objective' definition of loneliness consists of an *abstract summary* of feelings, emotions and behaviours that is not responsive to specific clinical solutions or practical applications. Rather than the sum of different feelings, emotions, behaviours and symptoms, we can think of subjectivity, as most philosophers in the phenomenological tradition do, as underlying all these manifestations, enabling a more fundamental level of explanation.

Neglecting an in-depth study of the subjective experience of loneliness leads to interventions whose only goal is to increase social interactions. Such interventions assume that loneliness is the same as social isolation – they provide social exposure in response. This undermines the widely recognized distinction between loneliness and objective social isolation (a state of no physical contact with other people), which has led to useful insights on the experience of loneliness. That is, even when loneliness is influenced by quantitative or objective characteristics of social relationships (such as frequency of social contact or number of friends), is more greatly influenced by the qualitative or subjective appraisals of these relationships, such as satisfaction with the relationships or perceived social acceptance as a result of those relationships (Asher & Paquette, 2003; Cutrona, 1982; Jones, 1982; Wheeler, Reis, & Nezlek, 1983). Following this definition, studies have shown that not all people with limited social networks are lonely (e.g. Fischer and Phillips,1982), and that a person's total number of friends is not a good predictor of their loneliness (e.g. Jones, 1982). More needs to be understood about the distinction between social isolation and loneliness.[83] Theoretical distinctions need to be refined and the lack of empirical insights into how the two interact

[3] de Jong Gierveld, Van Tilburg and Dykstra (2018) is again a good recent reference for this discussion.

should be addressed, especially if we want to improve interventions and measurements.

## 1.3. Different Dimensions of Loneliness

*1.4.1. Chronicity*

A fundamental challenge in characterizing loneliness is that there are differences in the temporality of loneliness. Researchers have noted that when feelings of loneliness are short-lived and determined by life situations, they are less troubling than when they are chronic (Asher & Paquette, 2003; Neto & Barros, 2000). Peplau and Perlman (1982) distinguished between transient and persistent loneliness. The first terminological distinction that referred to the duration of loneliness over time was by Young (1982). He distinguished between *situational loneliness* (a person had satisfying relationships until they underwent a change, such as bereavement, that disrupted these relationships); *transient loneliness* (occasional lonely moods); and *chronic loneliness* (a person has not found their social relationships satisfying for a period of more than two years).

Loneliness has also been connected to a personality trait, as it is possible for some people to feel lonely more frequently and in different contexts (Neto & Barros 2000). Here, some researchers have proposed to distinguish between *trait loneliness* to refer to an enduring experience, and *state loneliness* to refer to immediate feelings of loneliness (Jones, 1987). Considering chronicity in this way and making the terminological distinctions mentioned above has led to some discoveries, as Heinrich and Gullone (2006) point out. Different studies have shown many ways in which people who are chronically lonely differ from those who are transiently, situationally or state lonely. For instance, studies of chronically lonely people present long-term behavioural, affective and cognitive deficiencies, and are internally more self-deprecating in their attribution of interpersonal failures (Cutrona, 1982; Snodgrass, 1987). Researchers have argued that situational loneliness can become chronic if it persists. Another

discovery is that those who are temporarily lonely are more able to communicate how they feel than those who are chronically lonely (Gerson & Perlman, 1979). This has led researchers to believe that detecting where and how this transition occurs could have important treatment implications (Rook & Peplau, 1982).

There is much room for improvement in this area. When they consider temporality at all, existing studies only focus on chronicity (the duration of time for which loneliness persists). One way of advancing current research is to focus on the frequency and duration of lonely episodes, as is commonly done in research on depression. But we could also think about temporality in different terms to enable more fine-grained terminological distinctions. We could consider temporality from a phenomenological perspective. Such a perspective has impacted how researchers in psychopathological phenomenology, both past (e.g. Binswanger, 1960; Jaspers, 1946/1963; Minkowski, 1933/1970) and present (e.g. Fuchs, 2005a; 2007b; 2013; Ratcliffe, 2012; Sass & Pienkos, 2013), have approached mental disorders and their symptoms. These authors are interested in understanding how consciousness is altered in different clinical contexts. On this view, single symptoms and neurophysiological disfunctions cannot be separated from the way in which they are subjectively experienced. The phenomenological method is particularly suitable for exploring this.

Phenomenology is interested in consciously lived experiences and the objects of these experiences. Some classical phenomenologists investigate consciousness by investigating how it shows itself in subjective experience, rather than focusing on causal explanations (Fuchs & Pallagrosi, 2018). Temporality is particularly important because consciousness is understood as manifesting itself as "a "becoming', a temporal 'streaming' of a unity of intertwined experiences. This streaming is not an amorphous mass of contents, but is organized into a field of consciousness, which exhibits certain structures involving intentionality, temporality, embodiment, self-awareness, and intersubjectivity" (Parnas, Sass & Zahavi, 2013). In this

sense, temporality is one of the basic structures of human experience and considered one of the most complex topics in phenomenological psychopathology.

This approach distinguishes between different dimensions: temporality as pre-reflectively lived, temporality as reflectively or consciously experienced, and temporality as intersubjective. These distinctions allow us to consider more fundamental aspects of the constitution of our experience, for instance, the different processes that underlie our capacities for estimating duration of objective events such as our ability to remember and anticipate. An example of the connection between temporality and mental disorders is offered by Fuchs (2013) when he argues that melancholic depression is triggered by a "desynchronization of the individual from her environment, which then develops into a physiological desynchronization" (Fuchs, 2013, p. 100). Loneliness also includes experiential abnormalities that may result in, or be provoked by, different alterations in our experience of time, and fluctuations in the intensity, quality and meaning of loneliness (Yang, 2019), according to context.

There is a vast territory to explore for researchers in this line of investigation. We could hypothesize that when we are lonely, a given span of time can feel much longer to us than when we are not; our memories will be affected by whether we are or were lonely; and our attitude to the future will be affected too by whether we are lonely. We can go further and explore more basic capacities for experiencing time and its connection to loneliness. We could ask, for instance, how one's own and world time are desynchronized and how this generates feelings of distress or wellbeing when one is around others; whether there is an experience of acceleration or retardation of time in lonely people; how an altered experience of time (such as could be experienced by lonely individuals) might affect their sense of self, and so on.

### *1.4.2. Collective, social and intimate dimensions*

Recent empirical research proposes that there are three ways in which loneliness can manifest itself: intimate, relational and collective (Cacioppo, Grippo, London, Goossens & Cacioppo, 2015; Hawkley, Browne & Cacioppo, 2005; Hawkley, Gu, Luo & Cacioppo, 2012). The argument is that the three dimensions of loneliness are related to human attention, as introduced by Hall (1963; 1966). The attentional space is divided into *intimate* (the space that most closely surrounds a person); *social* (where people comfortably interact with friends, family and acquaintances); and the *public space* (a space that is more anonymous) (Cacioppo, Grippo, London, Goossens & Cacioppo, 2015). Weiss (1973) and Dunbar (2014) further argue that there is some correspondence between these three dimensions and how social networks are structured.

People who lose a life partner or someone very close to them (through death or a broken relationship) may experience a very painful sense of loss that researchers have called *intimate or emotional loneliness* (Weiss, 1973), characterized as "the perceived absence of a significant someone (e.g. a spouse), that is, a person one can rely on for emotional support during crises, who provides mutual assistance, and who affirms one's value as a person" (Cacioppo, Grippo, London, Goossens & Cacioppo, 2015, p. 4). The intimate connection that this dimension refers to is that observed between people who are part of what Dunbar calls our 'inner core' (Dunbar, 2014): a group of often no more than five people we can count on for emotional support in times of crisis (Ortigue, Viaud-Delmon, Blanke, Annoni, Pegna & Landis, 2003). Several studies support the idea that when someone has no life partner, they are more likely to experience loneliness. This is consistent with studies indicating that people who have a life partner experience lower levels of intimate loneliness, and with studies that link losing partners to greater levels of intimate loneliness (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Russell, 1982; Waite & Gallagher, 2001; Weiss, 1973). It is important to acknowledge that people who may be lonely

in this way may still connect with other people. In the case of the loss of a partner, other members of the family, close friends or colleagues may provide connections that the lonely person is able to sustain and turn to for different kinds of support. It may, however, happen that such relationships are missing, and in such cases the person may experience *relational loneliness.*

*Relational loneliness* or *social loneliness* (Weiss, 1973) is due to a lack of perceived connections with the 'sympathy group' (Buys & Larson, 1979; Dunbar, 2014) within one's relational space. This group is usually formed by family connections or friendships, and can include 15-50 people we see regularly and who are "core social partners … from whom we can obtain high-cost instrumental support (e.g. loans, help with projects, childcare)" (Cacioppo, Grippo, London, Goossens & Cacioppo, 2015, p. 4). Here, researchers argue, the relational space is delimited by auditory, visual and tactile possibilities that allow face-to-face interactions and communications. For instance, a study shows that in middle-aged and older adults, frequent contact with family and friends is the best (negative) predictor of relational loneliness (Hawkley, Browne & Cacioppo, 2005).

Finally, *collective loneliness* refers to the connections that a person can have with others who are similar or part of a network (such as a nationality, political party, or other group) and that can be at a distance in the collective space. This corresponds to the outermost social layer (Dunbar, 2014) and includes 150 or more people with whom ties are not strong, but who can provide information and what researchers call 'low-cost' support. Studies show that middle-aged and older individuals who belong to more voluntary groups are less likely to experience collective loneliness (Hawkley, Browne & Cacioppo, 2005). Researchers argue that this dimension of loneliness may have emerged as a result of evolving a capacity to develop relationships with groups, for the purposes of cooperation in adverse conditions (Brewer, 2004). For instance, when feeling part of a nation, one may also feel compelled to defend it. It

is further argued that investing in and identifying with a group may result in the continuity of the group and of its members' genetic legacy (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, & Boosma, 2014).

This classification highlights important aspects of the experience of loneliness, but it also leaves several questions unanswered. The distinction between dimensions is made according to where in the attentional space the person feels a sense of loss. In-depth research is required to further clarify the intersection between attentional space and absences; the different subjective experiences of absence at different levels (an experience of absence at an intimate level may imply different embodied aspects than an experience of absence at the collective level); the relationship between attention and absence; and the nature of the experience of absence (in what sense can we say we perceive absences?). One of the most puzzling instances of loneliness is the feeling of loneliness that someone can experience even when she is in the presence of others (be them partners, family members, etc.) This suggests that there may be more to this experience of absence than a perception of absence of a specific other (or group of others). This takes us further into questioning the classification. That is, if attention, and experiences of absence are the most salient features of loneliness, we may wonder whether distinguishing between intimate, relational and collective is useful. More to the point, the same excessive focus on social deficiency that we saw in the previously discussed definitions seems to have influenced this classification. In this typology, the line between loneliness and social isolation is blurred again.

From a phenomenological perspective, talk of attentional space also raises questions about our embodied place in the world. This is a particularly relevant question because when we consider the role of the body in the experience of loneliness, we would want it to be in very different terms from those framing the role of the body in social isolation. The body is a fundamental aspect of the structure of human experience. "In so far as it sees and touches the world, the body is that by which there are objects" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 92). A

phenomenological perspective distinguishes the objective body from the lived body. The lived body is primarily a perspective on the world and not an object we take a perspective on, as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre argue (Zahavi, 2017). Now, this perspective originates from a practical engagement with a world that is pre-reflective and pre-theoretical. Alterations at the pre-reflective level can result into alterations of the embodied communication. There are different types of alterations in different conditions. For instance, the feeling of excessive visibility of the body's surface (characteristic of the phenomenology of depression) or the feeling of transparency of one's condition (characteristic of the phenomenology of melancholia) (Micali, 2011). The different forms of contact that a person has with her physical environment may have consequences for how she interacts with the social environment, for whether this evolves into a social disruption problem, and even for her constitution as a self. A way to illustrate this is to think that a person in solitary confinement has very different possibilities for interaction with the environment from someone who is out in nature or in a big city, and that this alters their experience.[94] Incarceration illustrates not only the effects of immobility but also the extent to which the regimentation of time and the phenomenology of waiting can become different sorts of psychological torture (Wang, 2018).

Further research needs to disclose the mechanisms involved in our capacity to adapt to different environments and whether such a capacity facilitates social adaptation. Social disruption is not the sole ground for research on loneliness: there may be other more fundamental aspects at the onset of the experience. Understanding absences, and the embodied aspects of loneliness experiences, seem likely to be important features.

### 1.5. Summary

[4] See Guenther, L. (2013) and Gallagher, S. (2014) for more detailed analyses on the phenomenology of solitary confinement.

In this chapter I have reviewed dominant definitions of loneliness. I raised some issues about such definitions and suggested that addressing them will have implications for future research on different types of loneliness. There are elements I could not address, such as the relationship between loneliness and emotion theories, whether loneliness can be measured, and what the different methodologies are for studying it. The distinction between loneliness and social isolation and its impact on empirical studies deserve further examination as well. The first issue I identified with the current definitions is the excessive focus on the nature of humans as social beings and loneliness as social disruption. Sociality is affected in many dysfunctions such as depression, social anxiety. Excessive focus on social relations when we define loneliness does not allow us to investigate the particularities of the experience and to distinguish loneliness from other experiences that are as socially disruptive. The second issue relates to loneliness being characterized by specific behaviours, emotions and thoughts. This concept is underlined by a view of subjectivity that identifies subjective experience with these manifestations. I suggested that a phenomenological perspective offers a different view on subjectivity by focusing on structural aspects of lived experiences, and regards it as something more fundamental that underlies all the other manifestations (specific thoughts, feelings, etc.) currently examined. Adopting such perspective would shift the focus of definitions of loneliness.

I also focused on some philosophical aspects of the concepts of loneliness that are being overlooked. Potential areas for research already been identified are the temporality of loneliness and the role of attention and perception in the experience of loneliness. I have argued that we need definitions of loneliness that address disturbances (e.g. absences) or experiential abnormalities (e.g. embodied experiences) in subjective structure. Exploring the issues raised here would have implications for our terminology and our future research on types of

loneliness. These would in turn allow for the design of new treatments and interventions.

### 1.6 What are the following steps in this thesis?

There is currently a lack of focused work on loneliness in the philosophical literature and this is a strange oversight as loneliness is, arguably, a universal experience. My intention is to contribute to filling this gap by following a specific line of research and answering some questions.

As I argued in this first chapter, in the existent literature on loneliness there is a dominant tendency to focus on social relationships and the lack thereof. Thus, when characterizing loneliness, there is a tendency to focus on social distress. I noted that this is just one aspect of the experience. Unlike social isolation, loneliness includes more than the experience of absence of other people. Therefore in the thesis I investigate the nature of the experience of absence in loneliness and how this experience of absence is only partly related to other people. For this, I explore the questions such as of how attunement to a range of elements in the environment, rather than only feeling connected to people, influences people's experiences of loneliness.

Loneliness is also deeply disruptive of people's experience of the world. So another important problem that I address in this thesis is in what sense is the world disrupted and what causes this disruption. For this, I investigate how the capacity to appear to others and to oneself and being engaged in a world that is coherent are connected. Furthermore, I address the question of how loneliness results into a disruption of self and self-knowledge.

The methodology is primarily phenomenological. This choice fits the desire to carefully describe the character and structure of loneliness. That is, I adopt a phenomenological approach to develop a rich theoretical framework for describing the felt character and different

experiential dimensions of loneliness that are currently an underinvestigated topic in philosophy.

The thesis is not purely theoretical, however. I use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative research method, to gather and discuss first-person reports on loneliness. I expect the reports to significantly enrich the analysis and give it a concrete grounding. The principles of this method are explained in detail in next chapter. Here I briefly outline the main reasons for choosing this method in relation to the type of experience and the questions that this thesis addresses. Firstly, in order to properly describe the felt character and the different experiential dimensions of loneliness, it was important to start by analysing the different linguistic expressions with which loneliness is described. These go from aesthetic (e.g. people refer to the emptiness of a city) to physical sensations (heart wrenching). The aim was to reconstruct the world of the lonely in as much detail as possible paying careful attention to the linguistic expressions that the person uses to describe her world and her relationship with it. Secondly, loneliness is generally held to be an existential and universal human experience, regardless of age, gender or social circumstances but it is nevertheless given shape and meaning by the context in which it is formed. The loneliness experienced by someone who lost a life partner is likely to have different features than the loneliness experienced by someone who recently gave birth. Thirdly, as previously mentioned, loneliness is *salient* because it is a disruptive human experience, with distinctive features (e.g. see Achterbergh et al., 2020) and significant consequences (e.g. see Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010).

The view is that some experiences (especially those of existential significance) might be best and most fully articulated and understood via such personal narrative accounts. I have used a methodology that employs a mode of interviewing that elicits such accounts, and its analysis then proceeds by decoding the structure of the participant's narrative.

In doing analysis, I have identified the components of that structure, through a phenomenological lens: first the objects of concern, then experiential statements which capture the participant's relation to those objects, and finally developing more fully articulated interpretations of the relationship between the person and their world in the form of thematic structures. These thematic structures tend to describe the *meaning* of what is known rather than the *how* of coming to know.

Since contextual knowledge is important to understand the experience of loneliness, it was important that the type of qualitative research that I employed paid attention to the role of language, culture and other forms of contextual resources in coming to understand the meaning (and worldliness) of respondents' accounts.

In this thesis I chose to present a study with particular population and context. That is, loneliness and solitude as understood by a specific population (catholic sisters) in a specific context (religious life). Convents, and the religious and cultural practices which sustain them, provide a distinctive context for experiencing people's sense of connection and disconnection with one another, with their environment, and with the changes they experience. In particular, this is a context that promotes service to the community therefore making more salient when relationships between the individual and the community are not harmonious and separateness occurs.

This context also provides the opportunity to revise theories of loneliness that make distinctions between individual, social and collective loneliness. The women interviewed, as all the women who choose to join the catholic order, were expected (and made a choice) to dedicate their lives to the service of the collective. That is, they are not supposed to have families in the traditional sense. And this provided a unique opportunity to explore aspects of loneliness that were not related to absence of partners. Another interesting feature of the group

of women that I interviewed is that they led lives that took them to environments that were very different from their own, having gone on missions to different parts of the world and at different times of political, social and racial unrest. This offered an opportunity to explore the impact that radical changes in the environment can have on one's experience of loneliness.

Another reason for recruiting form this group is that it would facilitate the exploration of not only the experience of loneliness but also of the experience of solitude. People who choose to join religious groups are known for choosing spiritual paths and spirituality is often related to solitude.

A final reason for recruiting from this group is methodological. It is known to be a challenge to access to participant's first-person experiences and one of the reasons for this is that participants are often not used to self-reflection. The participants from this group incorporate introspection and self-reflection into their daily routines.

Taken together, I hoped that these qualities would facilitate access to aspects of the experience of loneliness and solitude that have been underexplored and are less well understood.

In the following chapter, I give more details about the methodology and present the results of the study of the participants' experiences of solitude and loneliness throughout their religious lives.

# 2

# Absence of Other and Disruption of Self: an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Meaning of Loneliness in the Context of Life in a Religious Community[10]

## 2.1. Abstract

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is an idiographic approach to qualitative research. It is widely used in psychologically-informed studies that aim to understand the meaning and context of specific experiences. In this chapter (1) I provide some background and introduction to the principles and processes underpinning IPA research; and (2) I present the results from my study that explores the phenomenology and meaning of loneliness, through interviews conducted with a group of religious women. Through my observations on the complex role of absence in the experience of loneliness, I also show that IPA can be a powerful tool for exploring and understanding the meaning of salient experiences.

## 2.2. Introduction

### *2.2.1 Qualitative and qualitative research*

[10] This chapter is a revised version of an invited contribution that I co-authored with Michael Larkin, currently under review for *Philosophy and the Cognitive Sciences* on the topic of *Working with others' experience: theory, practice and application.* My contribution to this paper is detailed in points 2.3.6. Data Analysis and 2.3.7. Reflections of this chapter. Michael Larkin is an expert on IPA methodology. The idea, design, interviews and analysis of the study presented here are all my own.

Qualitative psychologists often distinguish between ‘Big Q’ Qualitative research, and ‘small q’ qualitative research. The heuristic was offered up by Kidder and Fine (1989), but it has endured because it captures something important. Anything that simply involves the collection and analysis of qualitative data can be ‘qualitative research.’ ‘Small q’ work can sometimes be pragmatic, mechanistic or descriptive – even deductive. It often involves the identification of ‘topics’ discussed by relatively large samples of research participants. This is qualitative research defined by data type, rather than by epistemology and methodology.

‘Big Q’ signifies an understanding of the history and context of Qualitative approaches and a commitment to an analysis that focuses not on topics, but patterns of meaning. Underpinning that commitment, the historical context provides important framing for the focus and limitations of these approaches, and for the means by which Qualitative researchers reflect on the differences *between* them. The linguistic (or discursive) turn in social psychology is critical here, because it solved some serious methodological problems by placing constraints on the inferences that could be made from verbal reports. 'Naive realist' methods such as the early iterations of Grounded Theory had effectively treated language as representational, and taken participants' words at face value. In the context of psychology's longstanding scepticism about direct 'intrapsychic' inferences, this was problematic.

Critiques (from feminist researchers in particular) highlighted the gap between representation and reality. When the linguistic turn responded to those critiques in the 1980s and 1990s, drawing on the work of Austin, Garfinkel, Foucault, Searle and others, a space was cleared for a different kind of qualitative research. The rapid development and growth of discursively-oriented approaches (e.g. Wetherell et al., 2001) showed that there were a range of ways to approach and analyse textual data whilst recognising that language was constructive and performative, rather than representational. Each of these variants on discourse analysis

drew on distinctive blends of theoretical and conceptual sources to provide the researcher with a distinctive epistemological lens. The same principle was followed by methodologies drawing on phenomenological, narrative and psychoanalytic concepts, as other new approaches entered the space. Thus 'Big Q' Qualitative approaches tend to share a number of features: a clear commitment to recognising the constructive and contextual role of language, and a distinctive blend of theoretical and conceptual sources underpinning a specific epistemological focus.

Some phenomenological approaches to qualitative inquiry predate the linguistic turn. For example, Giorgi's approach followed the Dutch School in advocating for a reading of Husserl that directs third-person researchers to identify the *essential structure* of experiences from participants' accounts. Other more recent approaches, arising from developments in the field of neurophenomenology (e.g. Petitmengin, 2006; Hurlburt & Akhter, 2006) appear to have sidestepped this frame altogether, perhaps because they originated to meet the needs of the 'naturalizing phenomenology' agenda in experimental empirical research. However, a number of well-established, phenomenologically-orientated approaches *were* developed in the context of 'Big Q' commitments – notably, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009), Critical Narrative Analysis (Langdridge, 2011), the Embodied Lifeworld approach (Galvin & Todres, 2012), and to some extent, Template Analysis (Brooks et al., 2015) and Reflective Lifeworld Research (Dahlberg et al., 2008).

### *2.2.2 IPA*

IPA was initially proposed and developed by Smith (1996) in the post-discursive social psychological context described above. Early studies focused on experiences of self, relationship, embodiment, health and wellbeing. Methodological writing about IPA developed through a series of collaborations (e.g. Smith & Osborn, 2003; Eatough & Smith, 2008; Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Larkin, Eatough & Osborn, 2011). There are now many examples of its use across a wide range of topics and disciplines. As IPA

has developed, methodological writing has consolidated around a number of key principles, with a degree of flexibility and innovation (e.g. see Smith & Eatough, 2019) encouraged beyond those core commitments. These core commitments can be framed as follows: firstly, IPA is a third-person approach to qualitative research, which requires first-person accounts of an experience, event, process or relationship that is of some significance to the respondent. In this respect, it shares common ground with the other 'Big Q' phenomenological approaches above. Secondly, IPA draws on a range of phenomenological writings for its conceptual grounding, including Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (see Smith et al., 2009; Smith, 2007; Larkin et al., 2006; Larkin et al., 2011). From these it takes the view that language has enough expressive power to convey someone's experience, under certain conditions. In IPA, understanding is possible through interpretation, *if* we are able to support our respondent in generating a rich account of their experience, and *if* we then think of that account as a means of understanding the respondent's position in the lived world, and thus *their relationship to the objects within it that are of most concern to them*. In this respect, in IPA research, the commonplace term 'experience' means something more precise than it does in everyday, folk-psychological usage. 'Experience' here is shorthand for something more relational than intrapsychic: IPA researchers are interested in understanding the relationship between persons and those aspects of their world that are significant to them. 'In between' person and world is where meaning arises, and in IPA's Qualitative analysis this is often framed explicitly through an examination of language that denotes or connotes valence (e.g. via reference to affect, emotion, feeling, mood, sensation, evaluation and appraisal) or relates it through tone, metaphor and imagery. This means that the outcomes of IPA work – themes – are more than simply 'topics that were talked about.' In a successful analysis, an IPA theme should function as an experiential statement, describing the participants' relationship to a specific aspect of a given phenomenon, drawing out the meaning of that thing for them. In this respect, IPA's

analytic outcomes are different to those of a number of other phenomenologically-oriented approaches, both in and outside the 'Big Q' context.

IPA writing has generally taken the view that the researchers' reflections on preconceptions and process are important. Conversely – and in contrast to some of the phenomenological approaches that predate the discursive turn – IPA researchers generally do not consider *a priori* epoché to be either a realistic or desirable objective. Instead, IPA acknowledges that insights into our fore-understandings will *not* cease to arise until we cease attempting to understand our topic, and thus reflection is a cyclical commitment, rather than a procedural step. IPA's use of this material aligns more closely with the tradition of reflexive writing that is common across most 'Big Q' approaches (Gough & Finlay, 2003).

Sitting within both a specific hermeneutic phenomenological and the wider post-discursive qualitative traditions as it does, IPA research foregrounds the role of language, culture and other forms of contextual resources in coming to understand the meaning (and worldliness) of respondents' accounts. This conceptual commitment to understanding context is implemented by a methodological commitment to idiographic-level analysis i.e. understanding the particular. This is a further distinctive feature: the reader of an IPA account should come away with some sense of divergence *and* convergence within the data.

I move now to the discussion of insights from my study of the experience of loneliness as understood by a specific population (catholic sisters) in a specific context (their religious life). This kind of formulation is important for IPA research in general, because the logic of sample construction (identifying respondents who share some commonalities of perspective, demographics or context in relation to the topic) allows IPA to meet its commitments to ideography and contextualising meaning. Loneliness fits the requirements of the types of experiences that IPA is interested in studying because it is disruptive human experience, with

distinctive features (e.g. Achterbergh et al., 2020) and significant consequences (e.g. Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Loneliness in a specific *context* is a good example to explore for our purposes here, too, because loneliness is generally held to be a universal human experience, but it is nevertheless given shape and meaning by the context in which it is formed.

One might well choose an IPA approach to explore the meaning of something precisely *when* we are interested in understanding *not only* the most common or stable aspects of that experience, *but also* those that arise only when we occupy a specific position in relation to it. Convents, and the religious and cultural practices that sustain them, certainly provide a distinctive context for experiencing people's sense of connection and disconnection with one another, with their environment, and with the changes they experience.

In the following analysis, I aim to explore some of these issues by examining the five main thematic structures I derived from analysis of our participants' accounts of convent life.

## 2.3. Method

### *2.3.1. Approach*

My design involved opt-in recruitment, to take part in one-to-one, in-depth interviews. The study plan received ethical review and approval from the Research Ethics Committee in the School of Life and Health Sciences at Aston University.

### *2.3.2. Context*

I made contact with a convent in central England. The convent is a community of Catholic religious women who describe themselves as having freely chosen to submit to vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience to a life-long service of God and neighbour. The sisters of this order are described as committing their lives and resources to the service of others. For the study of loneliness, there is an interesting ambiguity to this particular environment. It offers possibilities for studying detachment as well as connection and for exploring the different aspects involved in the interaction between the individual and the rest of the community.

*2.3.3. Recruitment*

A senior sister at the convent kindly agreed to act as a gatekeeper for the study. She provided general information about the research to other sisters in the community. I visited the convent and gave a presentation about the research. Potential participants were invited to 'opt-in' to the study by expressing their interest directly to me.

*2.3.4. Participants*

IPA usually requires a reasonable degree of homogeneity within a given sample, because its commitment to *idiographic depth* is generally met via close examination of a relatively small sample of cases, and its commitment to *addressing context* is generally met by working with some commonality of perspective on the experience-at-hand.

The participants were six religious women, all of whom were living in or near to the same convent, in a city in central England. The participants came from an order with a long tradition of providing education to the underprivileged, care for orphans, and support for marginalised and excluded communities, in England, Eastern Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa.

*2.3.5. Data Collection*

I conducted all of the interviews, which were audio recorded, in a quiet room at the convent. We planned for the interviews to have two parts, where the second, follow-up part was optional. The first part flexibly followed an interview guide, which used a series of open-ended questions to elicit and explore participants' experience of solitude, loneliness, relationships and connectedness via a range of activity-based discussions. For the follow-up, participants were asked to bring (or send) the researcher an object, image, piece of music, art or writing that reflected some aspect of the experiences described in their interview. Participants were also asked to provide a brief description of what their chosen object or image meant to them, either verbally, or in writing. Five brought pieces of writing; one brought a photograph. All interviews were fully transcribed, anonymised, and further supplemented by reflective process

notes.

The experiences gathered include loneliness as well as solitude: we focus on the former here. All the sisters talked about moments when they felt lonely in great detail. There was just one sister who said she never felt lonely. She talked about obstructions to communication instead and provided a journal with material written and collected during her time in Europe. The journal contains quotes from the Bible that refer to experiences of loneliness and solitude.

*2.3.6. Data Analysis*

The organisational structure of the analysis followed the broad process described by Smith and Osborne (2007) and began with a detailed reading of each case. This reading involved exploratory coding: annotating the features of interest and the researcher's reflections in the margin of the text. In IPA, this preliminary coding is partly about mapping out the data, and, in parallel, identifying areas where the researchers' preconceptions and interests are likely to be important.

In each case, further, more detailed, line-by-line coding was undertaken. In the IPA literature, a range of strategies are described for this stage, all of which are intended to help the researcher to identify and explore meanings within the text. I included specific analytic strategies described in Larkin et al. (2006) and in Larkin & Thompson (2011). These involve identifying the objects of concern (things that matter to the participant, in the world that they describe) and characterising the participant's relationship to those objects (the meanings those objects appear to have for the participants, on the basis of the language used to describe them,). The use of these concepts in coding helps to give some structure to the world that is revealed in the participant's account, and in each object's case, it foregrounds the 'meaning for' the participant, by reflecting on how that meaning is created through language, imagery and tone.

The coding for each transcript was organised in a table, to maintain the connection between the interpretative material (objects and their meanings) and the source material (data

extracts and line numbers). This document formed the basis for a case-level summary, which was developed for each participant's transcript. In each transcript, I then added proposals for possible themes, working at a higher level of abstraction. Possible themes were noted in the other margin on the transcript, and then mapped over to the case level summary. I explored and discussed these candidates for thematic categories, to check them for consistency with the evidence, coherence at the case level, and possible connections between them. From this, we developed a table of superordinate themes for the first case, within which the subordinate themes were 'nested' with identifying information (where instances supporting the theme can be found within the interview transcript). In this way, subordinate themes capture variations in meaning within each superordinate theme, and ensure that some degree of divergence is balanced with convergence in the final narrative account.

This was repeated process for each case, as part of a broad procedure of feedback and reflection throughout, auditing themes to ensure that they were well represented in the transcripts. After the analysis was conducted for each case, the case summaries were reviewed, to explore and discuss patterns across cases, and then documented these in a master table of themes for the group. The master table was transformed into a narrative account that is supported by verbatim extracts from the participants.

*2.3.7. Reflections*

I brought prior training in phenomenology to the project. In addition, a familiarity with the context (Catholic religious communities) helped me to develop a trusting atmosphere wherein private emotional experiences could be shared. This relationship was developed over a series of visits to the convent. Throughout the interview process, I kept a reflective journal where impressions, feelings and ideas were spelled out. These ideas were shared with my supervisor and other colleagues, allowing for the process to be clear and transparent.

The interdisciplinary conversations I had with Michael Larkin (my co-supervisor) included impressions and clarifications of the methodology throughout the interviews and analysis process. Interdisciplinarity forces experts to be in a process of constant clarification regarding their respective disciplines' methods and terminology. Michael Larkin's expertise with IPA helped by showing the different ways that analysis can develop. This provided a framework for me to organise the ideas and interpretations that were emerging from the data. My research on loneliness and solitude and background in phenomenology were an asset in clarifying concepts and focus. Having also expertise in philosophy of science, I was not just interested in the experiences of loneliness and solitude, but also in evaluating IPA as a mean of investigating these experiences.

**2.4. Analysis**

My analysis points to loneliness as a deeply felt, distressing experience of absence, which also prevents one from fully experiencing oneself. We discuss this via five main themes:

*1. Loneliness as a deeply felt distressing experience of absence;*
*2a. Absence as a loss of possibilities to act, to share, to experience;*
*2b. Absence arising from a feeling of being out of step;*
*3. The disrupted self;*
*4. The role of others: not being seen, not being heard; and*
*5. When loneliness ends: Getting back to 'the rhythm of life'; 'settling' and finding peace.*

I begin our analysis with a detailed examination of one passage from one participant, Sister Bertha. The passage illustrates many features that are present in the other accounts, although they each have their own distinctiveness. In the section quoted here, Sister Bertha responds to a question about times in her life when she experienced loneliness:

> Yes, I'll start with two periods of my life when I can say something about loneliness. In sort of a deeper way than, you know, the lonely moments you can have in any day and any specific time and that are just passing. […] I should never

> forget that period of loneliness. I felt I was on my own. I mean in my heart. I mean the place was full, there were a hundred people living about. But this period, you know, I can still feel the pain. […]
>
> And then, another time when I had a real stretch like that again was … that was 1954 when I entered [the convent]. And the next big stretch for me was when I volunteered to go to Africa … South Africa. I was excited about going in the missions. I went to this gorgeous country… and lovely new school and we were new sisters coming from England and we had a great welcome. And the same thing hit me […] And I thought: 'Oh, it's a beautiful country, and I'm so kind of … I'll never be able to stay here. I can't bear it, it's too far away' and my heart was bleeding again. And I had forgotten about the first bleed. [...]
>
> I was a different person in a different place but the intensity and the loss …was equally deep. And I should have known from the first loneliness. [chuckles]

One important feature of this passage is that it illustrates the distinctiveness loneliness has for Sister Bertha. Through this distinctive quality (a painful intensity of feeling, which she associated with the heart, with bleeding, and with loss), Bertha was able to locate times in her life when she had felt lonely. The distinctiveness of loneliness was evident for all our participants. It was known, identifiable, and easily distinguished from other, more mundane experiences ("you know, the lonely moments you can have in any day and any specific time and that are just passing").

For Sister Bertha, the experience is memorable for the sort of distress that it caused: "I can still feel the pain", and "I should have known from the first loneliness". In her interview, Sister Bertha spoke of three times when there was no doubt for her that she was experiencing loneliness. She distinguished these from other passing experiences on the basis of how poignant, intense and deep they felt. This is also reflected in the use of metaphors that give form to her temporal experience. Bertha's periods of loneliness are referred to as "stretches",

invoking both physical effort, and the idiomatic form of referring to a prison sentence. Perhaps the most striking imagery arises when Sister Bertha talks about a bleeding heart. This is a powerful metaphor. The Sacred Heart is one of the most familiar devotional images in the Catholic faith: a wounded heart that bleeds, crowned with thorns and with a cross on top that emerges from flames. There are several interpretations of this symbol as a place where bodily and spiritual enlightenment coincide. The image alludes to the crucifixion, sacrifice and pain. Sister Bertha may have brought it up in relation to the union of the physical and emotional pain experienced in loneliness. She may also be referring to the sacrifice that a feeling of separation and loss represents.

Another characteristic that we see very clearly in this excerpt is the experience of contrast. Bertha describes the beauty of the country she visits, of the new school, and reflects on her enthusiasm for the trip. She then immediately mentions the pain she experienced. In another part of the interview she says: “I would endure this awful feeling and this beauty.” The contrast also highlights a perceived separation (or discontinuity) between an emotional experience and what is described as the external appearance of the world. In Bertha's account, loneliness appears to have been given form and meaning through these contrasts. When she is surrounded by people, she says: “And I felt I was on my own. I mean in my heart. I mean the place was full, there were a hundred people living about.” This resonates with the themes relating to absence and the role of others, as discussed below.

Finally, Sister Bertha’s account reveals one other important manifesting quality of loneliness: it can happen regardless of age or place. Sister Bertha says: “I was a different person in a different place but the intensity and the loss …”. Loss was an aspect repeated by all the participants. This pain and loss, as the passage illustrates, is experienced even when surrounded by others. This is one of the most striking characteristics of loneliness. In our discussion of the thematic structure, below, we will explore how this is possible.

*2.4.1. Loneliness as a deeply felt, distressing experience of absence*

What is lost is only partly related to people. The following passage is one of the many that represents the central aspects of the experience of loneliness:

> I went from a place where I was managing and enjoying things to a new place that didn't have the old friends again and the old experience, totally new. And again the pain in my heart and I remember saying to one of the sisters after a week of being there. I said: "Oh, it's a beautiful country and everybody is so nice. But I'll never settle." And that was absolutely true then. And I couldn't see anything, couldn't see myself. And I should have remembered the way back when I had that first big break again that made me heartbroken. But it didn't, you know my rationale was here I was now. […] It was about what my heart had left back here and it was gone. And then it takes a while for things to catch up and settle.

Sister Bertha is referring to many aspects of the experience. The use of the word "place" can be interpreted in two ways. Bertha is referring to leaving one physical place that felt familiar (the convent in England) and going to a new one (the mission in Africa). She went from a familiar place where she had friends, to a new place. This produced "a big break" that made her "heartbroken". She does not only refer to the friends she lost, or the physical place: she also refers to "the old experience" that she lost. This is reinforced when she says she could appreciate the beauty of the new place but that she "couldn't see anything". Bertha is able to appreciate beauty but she is unsettled, and her ability to engage with this beauty is disturbed. Going from an old place *to* a new place is also going *from* an old way of experiencing the world, and adapting to a new one. It is as if the participant has lost her way of orienting herself in the world. Her own position and perspective in the world are lost ("couldn't see myself"). She adds: "It was all about what my heart had left and *it was all gone*." It is interesting that it is the heart (a symbol of authenticity, self and emotion) that she signals as the vehicle of her loss. Here, her heart has no point of orientation. Bertha's case, and her use of the

heart image, exemplifies a meaning of loneliness that was salient for many of our participants: that loneliness was a form of loss, losing a sense of one's place in the world, the possibility of understanding oneself and a sense of meaningful connection to others.

*2.4.2a. Absence as a loss of possibilities to act, to share, to experience*

At any given time, many experiences are not present for us, but are also unnoticed, and thus do not cause any distress. By contrast, our participants described very distinct experiences of absence: these were intensely lived, memorable and had a specific duration. Participants knew exactly when, why and how they started. And they knew what they were feeling when they started. Rather than going unnoticed, absences may be experienced as distressing and disruptive when they cannot go unnoticed. To some extent, the meaning of loneliness was constituted by this awareness of absence.

Absences can be triggered when there are obstructions to the possibility of action. We have seen this already in the extract where Bertha did not "see" herself because of how unknown the place was. In another example, Sister Sophia reflected on her frustration when she felt unable to communicate. She described a time when she felt that another sister had not appreciated a reading she had given, and another when she had been on a mission overseas where she did not have the linguistic skills to make herself understood. On these two different occasions, Sophia felt silenced, frustrated and disconnected. Sophia's account was a little different to the other participants, because she focused on connection rather than disconnection.

Insights into thwarted connection are an important aspect of understanding loneliness. Numerous qualities and feelings may get in the way of connection: Sister Sophia spoke about experiencing negative emotions in such terms. In response to a question about particular instances when she felt lonely, Sophia replied:

> I'm a jolly person. I need to laugh, I need to joke. It's inbred in me. And I think that's what might have been … I did get upset as I told you at the novitiate a few times. But I was scrupulous and I knew I had to get rid of that because that is wrong, that's pride, you see.

Despite declaring herself a jolly person, throughout the interview Sophia spoke about moments in her life when language and negative emotions (such as feeling upset and disconnected from someone else, in this example) were experienced as impediments to communication, and as causes of distress and disconnection.

Not every instance of negative emotion is an occasion for loneliness. Sister Augusta, for instance, told how she found it challenging to help a vulnerable friend in distress. Sister Bernice also told how she sometimes struggled to teach rebellious students. On these occasions, despite their distress, our respondents did not experience loneliness. What makes Sister Sophia's experiences play out as *instances of absence* is that in these moments, important aspects of Sophia's self are impeded from appearing *as* herself, *to* herself. Her self-experience is disrupted. Thus we might paraphrase the text above: "I'm usually a jolly person, but this prevents me from thinking of myself as lonely. I became upset at someone else's failure to appreciate me, and lost myself in this feeling of disconnection." Negative emotions do not always feel like impediments to acting or to appearing in a specific role. When they do, they are cause for experiencing disruption of self and disconnection.

*2.4.2b. Absence arising from a feeling of being out of step*

The perception of absence can also be triggered by a perceived desynchronization, mismatch, or change in the environment. In all the experiences of loneliness that the participants described, there was a pervasive feeling of being left behind, out of sync or out of place. It is worth rephrasing Bertha describing loneliness: "When you go from a place where you manage and enjoy things to a new place that does not have the old friends and the old experience."

Some ways of being out of step related specifically to desynchronization and a mismatch between one's own time, and the world's time. This is present in Sister Bernice's description of the loneliness that she experienced when arriving late for boarding school. Sister Bernice felt out of sync with others who had found their place within the school and settled into its rhythm. This is interesting when we think about what the opposite of loneliness (*settling*) meant for Sister Bertha: it involves getting into a routine with others.

Other oppositions that pervade the experience are related to a physical place (where England is near and Africa is far); to a difference in temperature (where England is cold and Africa is hot). As we saw in Bertha's account, loneliness involved a perceived contrast between the self and the environment, between the inner feeling and outer environment, a mismatch between what is seen and what is felt: "I would endure this beauty and this pain." In this theme, we note that this sense of incongruence was a common feature across the accounts. A perfect illustration of this mismatch is offered by Sister Bernice:

> But then that first Christmas. That was, again, I was very lonely. So there were actually three times: when I went boarding, when I left England to go to Africa, I cried so much on the boat. Some would say "you'll offend the sea" (chuckles). I didn't. And then, that first Christmas in Africa. For all of us. We were a group, quite a nice little group, we were very lonely. Just on the hottest day of the year. And we went through all the traditions of turkey and ham, even sitting around. We had heavy, heavy habits in those days.

It is striking in the extract how this was a group of sisters who were all *lonely together.* In this case, the sense of mismatch arises from an instance of the incongruence that can be experienced when rituals and traditional holidays are celebrated differently, or when they are uprooted from the relational and local context which make them meaningful. Sister Bernice was very clear about going through all the traditions but the fact that these were stripped their

usual context meant that the sisters felt lonely, even when they had each other. The fact that this was experienced by the group emphasizes the importance of our attunement to a *range* of elements in the environment, as opposed to only feeling connected to *people* in the experience of loneliness. It is important to note that this emerges in the analysis. The participants did not explicitly mention this opposition, and what this indicates is that the different sorts of experiences of desynchronization may be happening at a pre-reflective level.

*2.4.3. The disrupted self*

As quoted above, Sister Bertha said: "I could not see anything. I couldn't see myself." Sister Margaretta echoes what Bertha is saying, as she talks about the time before becoming a nun when she initially chose to nurse in London:

> This was my first time away from home in [a] big city and I was brought up in [the] country. But this feeling very quickly disappeared after a while. […] I had everything I wanted. I could do whatever I liked, I had my own money and I had total freedom and I could go to dances and pictures and could do whatever I liked.[ …] My loneliness was ... I was living a great life and I knew it wasn't enough. That the life I was called to was something that I would find much more difficult. And I had a sense of letting myself down. You know what I mean? It wasn't exactly. It was … let me say, disappointment with myself… Because, I should have joined the convent and I didn't. And I felt disappointment with myself. My ego was a little bit battered, as a young person. Because, here I was, this was all outside me, all these good works and everything that I was doing and then inside. I wasn't with myself inside, I wasn't myself. Because I wasn't really doing what I felt in my head I should be doing.

This passage highlights the connection between loneliness and the ability to experience a specific aspect of oneself. In the case of Bertha, it was the new environment that caused her to not even see what place and role she was going to occupy; for Margaretta, she was comparing the life she was living with the life that she knew she was running from. The passage speaks for

all the participants, each one of whom echoes the distress experienced when an aspect of the self cannot be developed or displayed. The experience of absence here seems to point at a non-developed or potential aspect of the self.

*2.4.4. The role of others: not being seen, not being heard*

Participants described how difficulties in sharing what they were experiencing could be a trigger for feelings of absence and loneliness. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is with an extract from Sister Augusta's interview:

> [Loneliness is] something you feel when someone you feel connected to is gone…when you grieve and nobody looks at your grief.

Here an interpersonal connection is lost and it is related to a specific someone's absence. But the experience of loneliness is not just about the loss of a connection with a specific person, it includes having an experience of nobody being there to 'witness' this experience. We clearly see this in Augusta's words ("nobody looks at your grief").

On some occasions, loneliness arises when people lose specific people. Some losses are more fundamental than others just as our connections with different people are at different levels. Sister Augusta talks about different degrees of connection:

> You're on a different base, you're on a different kind of platform. You're on a more secure kind of base…whereas normally, our relationships are tentative because you say so much and you are watching the reaction of the other person [...] But I wouldn't share … um …I wouldn't allow myself to be vulnerable with some people.

The loss of someone that she had a deeper connection with made her describe that loss as real loneliness. Here she talks about the death of her father:

> Loneliness … (*pauses*) I suppose when my father died I thought … yeah there was a sense of real loneliness then. 'Cause I felt very connected to him. And then he was

> gone and my mother was grieving and everybody was grieving and nobody's looked at my grief (*chuckles*). And I thought: "What about my grief?" Who was there to pick up my grief? But there wasn't anybody, 'cause everybody is grieving.

Here again, it is not just the death of her father, but the fact that she could not share her grief with anybody that made Augusta feel a sense of real loneliness: she says "Everybody is grieving", but rather this being a shared experience, here it means that no one person's grief is significant and, more importantly, that grief prevents us from seeing the grief of others.

Not being able to share experiences is a fundamental part of experiencing loneliness. The role of others lies precisely here. Many of the possibilities for our own experiences are related to the presence of others. We see this in Sister Catherine's interview. Together with another sister and four priests, Catherine spent many years working in a retreat in England where she saw many different people with different kinds of emotional suffering, who visited the centre. She talks about what she saw in those who were lonely:

> And I found those [moments at the retreat centre] … priceless because there were so many people who were just so … well, probably a bit lonely.[…] But when people are very lonely and churned [up], they just want something to, to … distract them almost. They don't realize it, but it doesn't … lots of times it doesn't work […] Well that was mainly … they were really looking … often they were looking for peace. They were looking for tranquillity. But they were looking for answers as well. Sometimes people came in really hurt and broken, and wounded [...]
>
> The biggest thing of all there was listening. I probably did far more listening to people than talking. And so often that's just what people wanted. Because, you know the hustle and the bustle of the world today.

This passage is very enlightening. Others create possibilities for us to act and to experience (people were "looking for someone, just to help them to experience"). That is, others seem to open a field of possibilities for action ("I did an awful lot of listening"). Catherine's role while

listening was, as she describes it in the passage, to help people to experience. This suggests that when the other is absent, it is as if a part of the environment is absent. But the role that the other plays in the environment is fundamental to the self, because every experience is co-experienced in the sense that it can be shared through communication. The role that others have is fundamental for us to be able to experience ourselves fully. In this sense, this absence may not be the absence of a specific person but of a more general Other. The experience of absence may be more structural than the specific, physical absence of the person.

*2.4.5. When loneliness ends: getting back to 'the rhythm of life'; 'settling' and finding peace.*
The period when loneliness ended is described by Bertha as the period 'things take to catch up and settle.' She says:

> I would endure this awful feeling and this beauty. I would endure it for a year. Almost to save face. And it was sort of in the endurance, you know? I deliberately didn't change my mind but it faded. […] And of course, you begin to settle. And get to know the children of the country and the parents and the rhythm of life there and settling to a new community.

Sister Bertha says she suffered through this period until she settled for the second time. She describes settling as beginning to "know the children of the country and the parents", but settling into a new community also means "getting to know the rhythm of life". This is a good example of why IPA's interest in the work done by language can be so informative. Here, the term "settle" presents us with the possibility of making two interpretations. One refers to settling into a specific physical place or territory (becoming comfortable, at home) and another refers to an emotional state of being at ease, finding oneself in place, of being calmed (entering a state of calm and peace). Sister Margaretta says:

> So I entered [the convent]. Oh, it was so difficult, the silence. At the beginning, we had strict silence. Totally different from the community at home [...] After one

> month: “Definitely,” I thought to myself, “Definitely, this is where I belong.” Because I had such peace. Now, it was very strict, but the strictness didn’t affect me in that it was breaking my heart or anything like that. I was sad of course after leaving my sisters and brothers and parents but … I had a peace. And I had been running away and suddenly I had found this peace and I never lost it.

Restlessness in connection to loneliness emerges in all the sisters' accounts. This is contrasted with peace and silence in connection to being at home and *being with*. This experience of peace seems related to finding oneself to be a fully present agent. To experience myself as an agent, I need to experience myself in relation to others, and to my own self, and both of these aspects of me need to be acceptable to me, congruent with me, in their appearing and enactment. Conversely, loneliness is a signal that these possibilities are being lost.

### *2.4.6. Discussion*

Earlier in the chapter, I described how IPA research is typically focused upon experiences of existential significance. To illustrate this, I have presented an analysis of the experience of loneliness, as it was understood by a group of interviewees living in a convent. We emphasised that IPA focuses on understanding the world from a respondent’s point-of-view via the language that they use to evoke that perspective. It reaches for the meanings of the salient features in their world, as these meanings show up for them. In this study, we accessed our participants’ perspectives via a series of in-depth, one-to-one interviews. The analysis draws attention to some of the work that their linguistic choices do to communicate meaning (the imagery of the heart; the dual meanings of “settling”; the different ways of talking about loneliness as absence and loss), and uses this to make the case for a series of themes. These themes represent my interpretative view of the patterns of meaning in the respondents’ accounts: I argue that the interviews give us insight into loneliness not only as disconnection from others, but also as a disjunction from self and self-knowledge. In presenting this, I reflect

on the perspectives that I brought to this and the unique context in which loneliness was foregrounded for our interviewees.

I note that choosing the life that they lead as nuns may allow some of its challenges to be experienced as virtues (as in Margaretta's account of leaving London, for example) in a journey towards spiritual and personal authenticity. This resonates with Edith Stein's comments on the compulsion of one's soul to find ways to become what it should be. I note also that while many of the themes I discuss relate to all our participants' accounts, there are some exceptions, especially in the case of Sophia. Nevertheless, through Sophia's emphasis on connection (rather than disconnection), the sense of thwarted possibility is foregrounded as a cross-cutting feature of distress and absence.

*2.4.7. How do the findings relate to the literature on loneliness?*

The results of this study extend some prevailing views about the experience of loneliness. Loneliness has been connected to the perceived absence of specific people in one or more of three different dimensions of our attentional space: *intimate, relational* or *collective* (Cacioppo et al., 2015; Hawkley, Gu, Luo, & Cacioppo, 2012). In this line of thought, the *intimate or emotional* type of loneliness (as in Weiss, 1973), for instance, is characterized as "the perceived absence of a significant someone (e.g. a spouse), that is, a person one can rely on for emotional support during crises, who provides mutual assistance, and who affirms one's value as a person" (Cacioppo et al., 2015, p. 4). In my study, loneliness was not always directed at the perceived absence of specific people. Experiences of absence were also articulated in other ways by the participants. This suggests that loneliness includes experiencing *different* kinds of absences. The participants expressed loss of other people as well as loss of experience, loss of one aspect of their own selves and even their own sense of self ("I couldn't see anything. I couldn't see myself"). I suggest that experience of absence may be an important, encompassing aspect of loneliness.

## 2.5. What are my main claims about loneliness?

*2.5.1 In loneliness, we experience a connection between the experience of absence, and the disruption of self-experience.*

The participants expressed their experiences of disconnection and absence as impediments to fully experiencing themselves. The connection between the experience of absence and disruption of self-experience revealed itself in the analysis in different ways and in different degrees. Some participants expressed this disruption explicitly: "[Lonely] people were just looking for someone to help them to experience…whether it was joy, peace, love…" These participants expressed the impossibility of undergoing specific experiences unless this experience is acknowledged or witnessed by others. Other participants expressed an acute awareness of the absence of the Other's perspective, as part of their experiencing: "When you grieve, and nobody looks at your grief." Furthermore, participants talked about not being able to see themselves as part of their experiences of loneliness. There is some resonance here too, with another phenomenological qualitative study (Guts et al., 2016), which focuses on intimacy, but also reaches the conclusion that connection is important to us because it affords possibilities for the self and the future.

The participants' experiences relate closely to some ideas developed by Jean Paul Sartre. Throughout his work, Sartre offers different descriptions of how different absences affected his experience. His views on the dynamics of our relationship with the Other are particularly relevant to our discussion of loneliness. He says: "A man evaporates without an eye-witness" (1962, p. 168). When describing what happens in another social experience (shame), Sartre argues that the Other is an indispensable mediator between myself and me. In our participants' accounts, this appears to be the case. Loneliness seems to be at a different level than shame or other emotions, however, in the sense that it may even block the possibility of experiencing them ("[Lonely] people were just looking for someone to help them to

experience…whether it was joy, peace , love…").

*2.5.2 Loneliness arises in discrepancy and incongruence*

Another key characteristic of loneliness is that it is often experienced when surrounded by others. The experience includes a sense of discrepancy, of disconnection and contrast. This common contextual, cultural understanding of loneliness is reflected in literature (theoretical and experiential) that refers to a disconnection between what is outside and what the person feels inside (as in the paradoxes summarised by Achterbergh et al., 2020, for example). In my study I found expressions such as: "I was on my own. I mean in my heart. The place was full. There were hundreds of people living about." However, the participants also referred to other sorts of contrasting experiences, beyond the social-relational domain ("I would endure this beauty and this pain"). A close look at the intentionality of the experience of loneliness may provide a more comprehensive account of this contrast. I find the distinction between objective and subjective poles of experience illuminating here. In his studies on the phenomenology of vision and touch, Katz (1989) distinguished these two poles. These reflect whether the attention is directed to the proximal stimulus or projected to the object 'out there'. Statements where the attention is directed to a distant object projected 'out there' ("I feel a pointed object out there") correspond to the objective pole of intentionality, whereas statements where the attention is directed to the proximal stimulus ("I feel a prickling sensation") correspond to the subjective pole of intentionality. This distinction between poles of intentionality can be extended to illuminate the incongruence from which loneliness arises. If we consider the intentionality of the respondents' accounts of loneliness, we can see a third person evaluative perspective of one's own relationship with the world. This is an evaluation in which the person reveals a disconnection between how they feel ("I was on my own") and what they see out there ("The place was full"). This may be called a disconnection between the objective and subjective poles of intentionality.

*2.5.3 Absence-in-presence distinguishes loneliness from other experiences that involve absence, such as social isolation*

I have shown that loss and disconnection are experienced even when surrounded by others. This is one of the most striking characteristics of loneliness and distinguishes loneliness from other experiences such as social isolation. One may say that it seems obvious that people do not need to connect with *everyone* around them, and another may counter that, nevertheless, they do need to connect with *someone*. This paradox is familiar, but a sense of incongruence is an important aspect of someone's experience of loneliness. The experience of absence of self and the disconnection between poles of intentionality seem to converge here, to illuminate the experience of feeling lonely even when around others.

## 2.6. Further reflections on the use of IPA

I have analysed data that involve both pre-reflective and reflective content. IPA's primary focus is very often turned towards reflective content, but by engaging with imagery, tone and metaphor, the tacit can often be explored, and may be foregrounded. Through engagement with the narratives produced by study respondents, IPA researchers often use material as data that is very similar to that used in other 'Big Q' approaches. I take the view that some experiences – generally those which are of some existential significance – might be best and most fully articulated and understood via such personal narrative accounts. IPA employs a mode of interviewing that elicits such accounts, and its analysis then proceeds by decoding the structure of the participant's narrative. In doing analysis, we are effectively identifying the components of that structure, through a phenomenological lens: first the objects of concern, then experiential statements which capture the participant's relation to those objects, and finally developing more fully articulated interpretations of the relationship between the person and their world in the form of thematic structures. These thematic structures tend to describe the *meaning* of what is known (as in our example here), rather than the *how* of coming to know –

though there are exceptions (e.g. Meneses & Larkin, 2015; Rhodes et al., 2019). Other phenomenologically-informed approaches may balance their commitments and draw on their key sources in different combinations to achieve a different focus (e.g. Halling, 2020), but in our view, this heterogeneity is a healthy and positive feature, providing a repertoire of choices for the researcher.

The IPA researcher does the work with knowledge and skills. Some of these skills are to do with knowing how to work with these kinds of data and processes – knowing how to conduct interviews, or when to consolidate analytic work, or when to focus in on detail, or when to discuss interpretations with others, for example. Contextual knowledge is also important. For example, in this study it was useful to have previous knowledge of some religious symbols and their meaning in order to be able to put them in the right relations to other expressions that were used. In this sense, epoché is not a good fit with IPA, and is replaced with an explicit acknowledgement by the researcher of all the previous (implicit) knowledge the researcher will be employing. The objective is not to rid oneself of this knowledge, it is rather to acknowledge it, and to use it knowingly. Like many 'Big Q' approaches, in IPA, good analysis relies on the creativity and insight of the researcher. It is important to acknowledge that the meanings discussed in IPA accounts arise through this intersubjective work, first as direct exploration with the respondent (the open-ended question of an interview) and subsequent analysis. IPA writing has often referred to this as the 'double hermeneutic' (Smith et al., 2009), but the idea of a social-relational dimension for phenomenologically-informed work is by no means limited to IPA, or to qualitative approaches (e.g. Gallagher, 2007).

A wide literature exists to support further IPA research. As noted in the introduction, it reflects on key concepts from phenomenology and hermeneutics and core methodological practices. It also covers developing connections to the fields of embodied and enactive

cognition (Larkin et al., 2011; Gunn & Larkin, 2019), illustrations of how IPA can be used alongside the development and evaluation of interventions (e.g. see Hudson et al., 2015), and methodological innovation (see the recent collection of papers edited by Smith & Eatough, 2019).

# 3

# Absence of Other vs. Absence of Self: Intersubjectivity and Intentionality in the Experience of Loneliness

## 3.1. Abstract

Loneliness has been connected to the perceived absence of specific people in one or more of three different dimensions of our attentional space: *intimate, relational* or *collective* (Cacioppo et al., 2015; Hawkley, Gu, Luo, & Cacioppo, 2012). However, the results of the qualitative study presented in this thesis showed that loneliness was not always directed at the perceived absence of specific people. Experiences of absence were articulated in different ways by the participants. This suggests that loneliness includes experiencing *different* kinds of absences and loss. The participants expressed loss of other people as well as loss of one aspect of their own selves and even their own sense of selves. From this, I suggest that the experience of absence may be an important, encompassing aspect of loneliness. In this chapter, I develop theoretical accounts for the main claims made about loneliness in Chapter 2: (1) *In loneliness, we experience a connection between the experience of absence, and the disruption of self-experience*; (2) *Loneliness arises in discrepancy and incongruence;* (3) *Absence-in-presence distinguishes loneliness from other experiences that involve absence, such as social isolation.*

## 3.2. Introduction

The previous chapter focused on the methodology used for studying the experience of loneliness. I showed the strengths of this method for understanding experiences of some existential significance from a respondent's point-of-view via the language that they use to evoke that perspective. I argued that IPA reaches for the meanings of the salient features in the participant's world, as these meanings show up for them.

I presented the results of a study of the experience of loneliness, as understood by a group of interviewees living in a convent. The participants in the study expressed their experiences of disconnection and absence as impediments to fully experiencing themselves. The suggestion was that the experience of absence may be an important, encompassing aspect of loneliness. I argued that the interviews gave us insight into loneliness not only as disconnection from others, but also as a disjunction from self and self-knowledge. I made the following three main claims: (1) *in loneliness, we experience a connection between the experience of absence, and the disruption of self-experience*; (2) *loneliness arises in discrepancy and incongruence;* and (3) *Absence-in-presence distinguishes loneliness from other experiences that involve absence, such as social isolation.* Each section of this chapter presents the theoretical background behind these claims.

**(1) In loneliness, we experience a connection between the experience of absence, and the disruption of self-experience**

A connection between the experience of absence and disruption of self-experience revealed itself in the analysis in different ways, but absences are everywhere. Phenomenologists such as Heidegger propose that when we are engaged and at home in the world, we exist and orient ourselves, we act and go about our lives in a world that withdraws because it is ss non-intrusive and unthought. If it is the case that we live naturally surrounded by absences without noticing them, it is worth asking: how do absences become noticed? And more importantly, how do

they become disruptive of our experience?

Some participants in the study expressed the impossibility of undergoing specific experiences unless this experience is being 'witnessed' by others. In some cases this disruption was expressed explicitly: "[Lonely] people were just looking for someone to help them to experience…whether it was joy, peace, love…" This disruption was also experienced to different degrees. Participants talked about not being able to see themselves as part of their experiences of loneliness. Other important questions to address are: in what ways are absences connected to disruption of self-experience? And how can this happen to different degrees? In the analysis of the study I found some revealing expressions such as, "When you grieve, and nobody looks at your grief." This reveals that part of the experience of loneliness includes an awareness of the absence of the Other's perspective.

As mentioned, throughout his vast body of work Jean-Paul Sartre describes different instances of absences. Sartre (1943) tells a story about going to a café for an appointment with his friend Pierre. When Sartre arrives, he is struck by its "fullness of being." The place is brought to life by veils of cigarette smoke in the air, the sound of the voices and plates clinking. Sartre surveys the objects and faces in the room, looking for Pierre. Each thing he looks at is centred in his awareness for a moment before he passes over it and moves on; it is not Pierre. Each face and object retreats into the background of the setting, no longer asserting itself on Sartre's awareness. "I look at the room, the patrons," he writes, "and I say, 'He is not here.'"[11]

Sartre is interested in understanding the nature of *nothingness.* He calls Pierre's absence his *nothingness*, and this sense of absence becomes the focus of his attention. As Bethany Vaccaro notes, since there is *nothing* in the place where Sartre expected to find *something,* the absence takes on a kind of being. Absence has its own presence in the world,

[11] Vaccaro, B. 2014, March 11, *The Presence of Absence. Our losses give vitality to our lives.* The American Scholar. [https://theamericanscholar.org/the-presence-of-absence/], Retrieved from URL on March 2018.

which is as real and substantial as its opposite. Sartre writes, 'I suddenly saw that he was not there.' He is struck by a nonentity. Its negative nature, its nothingness, is precisely what he notices. If Sartre was not looking for Pierre, the pool of nothingness would not be created. Sartre's knowledge of Pierre's presence turns his absence into a thing of its own. This nothingness is characterized by absence and this is interesting for the analysis of loneliness. Similarly to nothingness, loneliness is not a mere privation or reflection of the fact that we can make negative judgements, but rather a tangible feature of the experienced world.

> I go to the café expecting to meet my friend but he is not there. Nor is the Duke of Wellington. These two judgements are similar. But given my expectations to find my friend there, one nothingness, my friend's absence, has a reality not shared by the other. Whereas the café groups itself around my friend's absence, the Duke does not come into things at all. My friend, but not the Duke, is conspicuous by his absence, which is a real feature of the café, as I experience it. I can entertain the thought that the Duke of Wellington is not in the café, but I do not experience his absence. (Sartre, 1969, p. 41)

What is so powerful about the absence of Pierre (and not the absence of the Duke of Wellington) is that this absence is now part of how Sartre is experiencing the world. It is affecting his experience of himself and of the café to the extent that he describes it as a feature of it. Sartre did not expect to see the Duke of Wellington at the café, whereas he did expect to see his friend there, and this makes the friend's absence vivid and disruptive.

Instances of the profound ways in which our experience of self are affected by absences extend far beyond those provided by Sartre in his philosophical ponderings. There is a vast body of research[121] pointing at the extent to which the non-proximity of others can affect us. As Vaccaro puts it, "We know that children can sense absence too. This happens when a caregiver is missing …[and] it seems we only build on that ability for the rest of our lives, our

[1] Deriving mostly from attachment theory (e.g. Bowlby, 1958).

absence detectors have many opportunities to practice." How exactly do these experiences of absence of the Other reflect on the self?

### 3.2. Intersubjectivity breaks

Phenomenology emphasizes the constitutive nature of intersubjectivity. Shaun Gallagher (2014) points to the relevance of three concepts from classical phenomenology for understanding the experience of solitary confinement: being-with, transcendental intersubjectivity and intercorporeity. After making some distinctions, these concepts will also be relevant for understanding the connection between absences and the disruption of self-experience.

The concept of being-with or *Mitsein,* developed by Heidegger (1962) refers to the structure of human existence and shapes the way that we are in the world. The a priori structure of our human existence is by structure a being-with-others. In this sense, the social dimension is not something that it is added. We are not in the world first, and then we meet with others. "The fact that others are in the world only has significance because our existence is structured as being-with…If one happens to be alone, one still has the structure of being- with – and "only as being-with can [one] be alone" (1985, p. 238) (Gallagher, 2014)

Heidegger argues that this way of being-with co-determines other aspects of our existence, including our relations with the world around us. The world in which we find ourselves is a *with-world* (*Mitwelt)* in the sense that it is permeated with our social relations. We encounter others primarily through our perceptions of them and through our projects that involve them. Being-with also shapes our own self-experience. That is, our *own* existence is something that

one experiences in the kinds of pragmatic projects that one shares with others. And therefore, when the *Mitsein* structure is damaged, it damages the very core of the individual's human existence.

The second concept is transcendental intersubjectivity. This concept has its origins in Husserl's work (e.g., Husserl, 1959, p. 449; Husserl, 1968, p. 295) and points at the idea that the very objectivity of the world as experienced depends on others. In other words, without others, there is no possibility for us to experience a real and objective world that is also coherent and meaningful. This is because the way we perceive our immediate environments is by seeing things, not as mere surfaces, but as multi-sided objects based on an implicit reference to the (real or potential) perceptual perspectives that others can take on the same objects. Our basic experience of the world as having reality or objectivity depends on a kind of tacit confirmation by others. Thus everything objective that stands before me in experience and primarily in perception has an apperceptive horizon of possible experience, including my own and that of others. Ontologically speaking, my perception of the world is, from the very beginning, part of an open but not explicit totality of possible perceptions (that others may also have). The subjectivity belonging to this experience of the world is open intersubjectivity (Husserl, 1973, p. 289; translated in Gallagher and Zahavi, 2012)

Jaspers (1997), Minkowski (1970), Blankenburg (1971), and other researchers in psychiatry have contemplated the possibility of disruptions in the basic structures of being-with or transcendental intersubjectivity. In some forms of derealization, real things may no longer feel real or familiar, or as fully objective as they should. This can be can be analyzed as a disruption of transcendental intersubjectivity. Phenomenologists have analyzed some of the

symptoms of schizophrenia (including autistic aspects of schizophrenia) as involving very basic disruptions in self-experience or ipseity (e.g., Sass and Parnas, 2003). On this view, the loss of a basic intersubjective dimension of existence can lead to the loss of the sense of realness, as well as disturbances in what some have called the minimal self (Gallagher, 2000; Zahavi, 2007).

The third concept, is what Merleau-Ponty calls 'intercorporeity' and refers to the internal relation that exists between my phenomenal body and that of another (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). It is related to the other two concepts because our engagement with others can only happen in the realm of an embodied existence which involves our very basic sensory-motor processes involved in our bodily interactions with others. For Merleau-Ponty, the facticity of embodiment is not external to subjective experience or cognition because our body is 'where the mind happens' or where "the transcendental descends into history" (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p. 107). Because the actions of others elicit the activation of our own motor systems, our perception of others is interactional rather than observational. In this sense, the borders of the transcendental and the empirical become indistinct.

According to Gallagher, similar motor problems as well as more extensive and serious disruptions of experience as those exhibited in autism or induced autism are also reflected in the symptoms and phenomenology described by prisoners who are subjected to solitary confinement. The experiences associated with solitary confinement include fatigue, confusion, paranoia, depression, hallucinations, headaches, insomnia, trembling, apathy, stomach and muscle pains, oversensitivity to stimuli, feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, withdrawal, isolation, rage, anger, and aggression, difficulty in concentrating, dizziness, distortion of the sense of time, severe boredom, and impaired memory (Smith, 2006). Studies of 100 inmates in California's Pelican Bay Supermax prison (Haney, 2003) have documented some experiences

reported by some prisoners: “I went to a standstill psychologically once – lapse of memory. I didn’t talk for 15 days. I couldn’t hear clearly. You can’t see – you’re blind – block out everything – disoriented, awareness is very bad” (Cited in Grassian, 1983, 1453). Another confirmed sensory disturbances are, for instance, melting: Everything in the cell starts moving; everything gets darker, you feel you are losing your vision (Grassian, 1983, 1452). Moreover, memory problems were also reported: “Memory is going. You feel you are losing something you might not get back.” (Grassian, 1983, 1453). A systematic review of the phenomenology of solitary confinement reveals symptoms that involve serious bodily and motor problems, derealization, and self-dissolution (or depersonalization). Such a proposal reflects a traditional concept of self as an isolated individual substance or soul that benefits from introspection. If, in contrast, the self is relational, then solitary confinement, by undermining intersubjective relationality, leads to a destruction of the self. Stripping away the possibility of primary intersubjectivity – leading to the experience of depersonalization. Guenther (2013), describes the phenomenology associated with solitary confinement as becoming “unhinged”: “[Prisoners subjected to solitary confinement] see things that do not exist, and they fail to see things that do. Their sense of their own bodies – even the fundamental capacity to feel pain and to distinguish their own pain from that of others – erodes to the point where they are no longer sure if they are being harmed or are harming themselves” (Guenter, 2013, p. 11).

It is clear that the experiences of absence that I mentioned in the first part of this section are very different from the type of disruption to intersubjectivity that solitary confinement causes. All of what is around in a normal environment is lost in solitary confinement and this loss undermines the world as real and objective. The type of absences in loneliness are different from what is absent in cases of solitary confinement. In loneliness the world does not lose its objectivity. However, the absence experienced in loneliness is vivid, noticed and could modify

our world in different degrees. In the study some descriptions involved references to a disconnection with one's purpose in life ("I wasn't with myself inside, I wasn't myself.") which can imply a modification of one's place in the world. But I also found descriptions which included references to losing sight of who one is and of what is around ("I couldn't see myself; I couldn't see anything.") This suggests a more fundamental type of disruption that, we can say, are disruptive of our being-with. When we fail to encounter others because we do not perceive projects that involve them, this structure is affected. And, as a consequence, our own self-experience is affected too.

I want to argue that the concept of trascendental intersubjective, although it originally refers to our capacity to perceive an objective world, points at something really important. That we perceive our environments as multi-sided object based on an implicit reference to the (real or potential) perceptual perspectives of others on the same things. This includes the perceptions that others can have of ourselves when we act in the world. Just like everything else in the world, aspects of myself can be experienced by others in perception. And this is part of the apperceptive horizon of possible perceptions. When others fail to see aspects of me, my own appearing is disrupted. The objectivity of the world stands intact but some aspects of my own existence may not. Let me make further distinctions and make some connections to some existent theories on loneliness in order to shed more light into what is happening in this experience.

### 3.4. The subject, the Other, and the world

Thomas Dumm (2010) defines loneliness as "the existential realisation of a strange fantasy, the loss of self, world, experience, and thought" (Dumm, 2010, p. 45). Perhaps Dumm goes too far in calling it fantasy but he highlights something interesting in loneliness: the disaggregation of world self and experience. All these different elements are at play when intersubjectivity is

affected in the experience of loneliness. And it is important to distinguish them and see how the dynamic among them is disrupted.

Hannah Arendt's (1978) ideas about the phenomenology of loneliness are relevant to understanding this point. Her definition of loneliness is inspired by totalitarianism in Nazi Germany. Her theory puts emphasis on the loss of world in common. She defines loneliness as the total absence of a world in common (with others). Different from theories that emphasise on the absence of specific people, in Arendt's theory the absence starts is in the world in common: what is in between the subject and the Other. Arendt established a relationship between the destruction of the individual and the collapse of the political. She was interested in emphasising the interconnectedness on existence in the world as a unique self on the one hand, and of action in the world, on the other.

Arendt talks about times when she gives a lecture to an eager group of students, amuses a group of friends over lunch and is remembered and recognised by the clerk at the corner bookshop. In each of these situations, her uniqueness is disclosed as she acts within, and is recognised by, the world. These are perfect examples of being-in-the-world where we encounter others in a worldly situation. And our way of being together and understanding each other is co-determined in its meaning by the situation at hand. In our daily life of practical concerns we are constantly with others. The students, friends and clerk each possess a definite idea of the Arendt's uniqueness; each has a concept of who she is. Importantly, Arendt also experiences herself as a unique being through each of these interactions. Her appearance before others reinforces her understanding of herself as an individual in the world (Lucas, 2019).

Sarah Lucas (2019) remarks on the consequences of not being able to appear for our agency. She proposes that we imagine that each of these moments occurs in a slightly impoverished world where the students do not listen, the lunch companions do not appreciate Arendt's humour, and the bookstore clerk does not remember her even though she comes into

the store often. The less she is perceived as a self by the world, the less she is able to appear as a self in the world. This repeated lack of appearance erodes her sense of her own uniqueness and thus erodes her agency. And the associations of a world, which confirm the agent's uniqueness, protect her from loneliness. When an individual's initiative to appear in the world is too often thwarted, she begins to feel less and less sure of her own capacity to appear.

One of the participants of the study presented in this thesis described the circumstances of the death of her father as an instance of *real loneliness.* She described how her whole family was mourning the loss and defined loneliness as "Loneliness is …when you grieve and *nobody looks at your grief* … 'Cause everybody is grieving." Even though the participant is surrounded by her family, she experienced a situation in which their pain does not let them see hers. She is unseen in her experience of pain. In the absence of his friend Pierre, Sartre said: "I look around and I say: 'He is not there.'" In this situation Sartre is no longer able to appear by displaying any aspect of his being a friend.

Understanding that there is a worldly situation 'in between' is important because we can better understand how the absence of the other impacts on the self. The worldly situation is eroded when the other is absent in some way. In other words, an absent other impoverishes and erodes a world where I was expecting to display unique aspects of myself. If, as phenomenologists argue, it is the case that our way of being together and understanding each other is co-determined in its meaning by the situation at hand, in loneliness there is still a situation at hand, except that we now have an absence on the other end. In this sense, we are still being co-determined by this absence and affected unmissably by it. We could go further and argue that the meaning is not just determined by the situation at hand but by all the consecutive situations. Being a friend requires a succession of situations in which one is displaying characteristics of being a friend (listening, supporting etc). Each situation has a

meaning but it also impacts on the self. Each situation diachronically adds to her being a friend. The absent friend is a negation of the possibility of being a friend. Be it in a café or in other possible instances, if this negation happens recurrently, Sartre's being as a friend may start eroding. That is, the absence of a friend has impacted directly on his own possibilities for being a friend. As mentioned in the previous chapter, a phenomenological qualitative study which focuses on intimacy (Guts et al., 2016) reinforces this idea by arguing that connection is so important to us because it affords possibilities for the self and the future.

(2) **Loneliness arises in discrepancy and incongruence**

Loneliness is often experienced even when surrounded by others. The experience includes a sense of disconnection, discrepancy and contrast. Researchers have noticed these 'incongruences'. Achterbergh et al. (2020) call them paradoxes. This understanding of loneliness is also richly depicted in different kinds of literature. In her book *The Lonely City,* Olivia Laing writes:

> You can be lonely anywhere but there is a particular flavour that comes from living in a city, surrounded by millions of people. One might think this state was antithetical to urban living, to the massed presence of other human beings, and yet the mere proximity is not enough to dispel a sense of internal isolation. It is possible – easy even – to feel desolate and unfrequented in oneself while living cheek by jowl with others. Cities can be lonely places, and in admitting this we see that loneliness doesn't necessarily require physical solitude, but rather an absence or paucity of connection, closeness, kinship: an inability for one reason or another to find as much intimacy as is desired. (*The Lonely City*, 2016, p.3)

Examples with reference to a disconnection between what there is 'outside' and what the person feels 'inside' abound. In the study, we found expressions such as: "I was on my own. I

mean in my heart. The place was full. There were hundreds of people living about." Moreover, our participants also referred to other sorts of contrasting experiences ("I would endure this beauty and this pain") that, just as Laing's example, go beyond the social-relational domain. In these examples contrasting qualities of the environment are highlighted as constitutive parts of the experience. In Laing's description, all the characteristics of the city aid the author to convey the immense sense of contrast: "massed presence…internal isolation"; "It is possible…to feel desolate and unfrequented in oneself while living cheek by jowl with others." In the study, it was the landscape in South Africa that was highlighted. The beauty of the blue sky outside was contrasted with the pain experienced inside. How can we understand that these two disparate elements as part of the same experience?

### 3.5. The intentionality of loneliness

A close look at the intentionality of the experience of loneliness may provide a more comprehensive account of how these discrepancies and contrasts between seemingly disparate aspects of reality come to be part of a person's experience of loneliness. Peter Goldie (2009) proposes that seeing specific aspects of objects in the world and not others is the result of intentional episodes that involve both our emotions and thoughts. Goldie is arguing for an intentionality of emotions. As opposed to bodily feelings which are intentional in the sense that they are directed at or about specific parts of the body, Goldie argues that the intentionality of emotions involves the concept of *feelings towards*.

An example of bodily feeling is when someone feels a pain in her right toe. The object of her sensation is her right toe, which feels a certain way, namely painful (Goldie, 2009). But bodily feelings are not the only possible emotional feelings. If bodily feelings could not "reach out" to be directed towards objects beyond the bounds of one's body, one would be obliged to accept the idea that all emotional feelings must be like this too (that emotional feelings must be

bodily feelings and thus cannot be directed towards objects beyond the bounds of one's skin). As an alternative to this view, the idea of feelings towards is that, just as we can have thoughts and perceptions directed towards the world beyond the bounds of our bodies, so too we can have feelings directed towards the world (Goldie, 2009). There is a more fundamental intentional element than belief or desire. This intentional element involves feelings that are directed towards objects in the world; and specifically, directed towards the object of the emotion. This intentional element is *both* intentional *and* involves feelings: "Feeling towards is *thinking of* with feeling, so that your emotional feelings are directed towards the object of your thought." (Goldie, 2009, p. 20)

The thoughts and feelings involved in an emotion have a *directedness* towards an object. The particularity here is that this object can be either a concrete object in the world or some specific feature of the object. The object of an emotion could be a particular thing or a person (that sky, this man), an event or an action (the ground shaking, you hitting me), or a state of affairs (my being in an airplane): "The object of my pride in this example is not just myself, nor just my house, but my-house-which-belongs-to-me" (Goldie, 2000, p. 17). The object of the emotion in Goldie's perspective does not have to be a concrete or physical world object. and does not have to exist. For instance, my pride directed to my-house-which-belongs-to-me presents a less concrete object than the pride a father may have in his daughter. The object of the pride in the second case is a given person, someone I could even point at. The first object is not the house on its own, but rather the fact that the house is mine.

There are several reasons why this theory of intentionality is interesting for our understanding of loneliness. First, the theory accommodates a variety of experiences regardless of whether we want to label them as emotions. Goldie proposes that this sort of experience typically involves a wide range of intentional states. These typically include not only bodily feelings and beliefs but also desires, hopes, wishes, imaginings, fantasies, etc. Each of these

can be bound up with feelings towards the object of the emotion. He argues that it is possible to see or hear *with feeling*, just as it is possible to desire or hope with feeling. Emotional feelings are not just bodily feelings, but also feelings directed towards things in the world. These feelings (so called *feelings towards*) are bound up with the way we take in the world in emotional experience.

Second, and more importantly, Goldie thinks that to understand the intentionality of the emotions in terms of beliefs, or beliefs and desires, is a mistake. For these beliefs and desires could be 'feelingless' and this would mean that feelings are left out of emotional experience. By 'feelingless', Goldie means that they could be characterized impersonally and without any reference to what it is like from the point of view or perspective of the person experiencing the emotion. But this is the point of view from which feelings are, and therefore fundamental to capture an emotion experience. When someone has an emotion, there will often be beliefs and desires that can be ascribed to her and that play a role in making intelligible both the emotion and, the behaviour motivated by the emotion and how the person manifests it (Goldie, 2000). He writes:

> When *I feel disgusted by the pudding*, my feelings of disgust are directed towards some *perceived or imagined property* or feature of the pudding (perhaps its sliminess) which *I deem as disgusting* (Goldie, 2000, p. 19).

When I think with feeling, my thinking is directed at something as being a particular way (disgusting), such that certain features become salient (sliminess). Goldie argues that this is an intentional episode because it is related to seeing an aspect of the object of the emotion. A pudding is not disgusting to everyone; it is only disgusting to me because I am seeing the sogginess it has, which disgusts me. This can involve imagination and perception, which influence each other.

Interestingly, this theory accommodates what some researchers say about the intentionality of loneliness. Cacioppo & Hawkley (2009) argue that when a person feels lonely, her feelings of loneliness are directed towards some perceived or imagined property or feature of the world. This theory of intentionality also accounts for results of empirical studies done on chronic cases of loneliness. As is well documented, the experience of loneliness involves a variety of bodily and psychological symptoms. Researchers agree that when a person feels lonely, her feelings are directed towards some perceived or imagined property or feature of the world (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009). Chronic cases of loneliness have been found to impair executive functioning, in part because loneliness triggers implicit hypervigilance for social threats. There is then a heightened sensitivity to social threats that results in biases in attention and cognition toward negative aspects of the social context. If we adapt this to our intentionality theory, we can say that lonely people may be thinking of something (e.g. a social encounter) as being a particular way (e.g. dangerous or threatening) such that specific features (e.g. people's facial expressions of rejection0 become salient.

How does this theory of intentionality help us better understand the contradictions that characterize loneliness? In each of the experiences of loneliness described at the beginning of this section, we found aspects or features that became salient to the person who was feeling lonely. Moreover, these characteristics were put in contrast with each other. Different features were perceived in different environments (the beauty of the blue sky in Africa; the massed presence of other human beings in New York), and these features were in tension with internal feelings and sensations (pain inside, internal isolation). The intentionality here takes two opposite directions. Both features of the environment (world) as well as of the person (feelings) become salient (beauty and pain; massed presence of human beings, internal isolation).

These two features (internal and external) are put in opposition and deemed part of the same experience. If, due to its characteristic of directedness, we imagined intentionality was an arrow, this would be an arrow with points at both ends. Now, for an opposition to exist between the two ends, if we consider what goes on in experiences of loneliness, for this to happen there needs to be a third person evaluative perspective of one's own relationship with the world. This is an evaluation where the person reveals *a disconnection* between how they feel ("I was on my own") and what they see out there ("The place was full"). Perhaps a way to understand why this evaluation arises is when we connect it to the need that, as human beings, we have to make sense of our experience.

According to Gallagher (2014) this evaluation is possible because we have an ability to gain a reflective distance from our own experience. This capacity for metacognition is inherent to all human beings and arises with the need for making sense of our experiences. A life event is not meaningful in itself; rather, it depends on a narrative structure that lends it context and sees in it a significance that goes beyond the event itself. As Donald (2006) puts it, metacognition provides the "cognitive governance" that allows for disambiguating and differentiating events within the narrative. To form a self-narrative, one needs to reflectively consider one's life events, deliberate on their meaning, and decide how they fit together semantically (Gallagher, 2014).

In loneliness, there are two elements that present themselves as disconnected. How does this *disconnection* arise? As I said in the previous section, when experiencing loneliness, an aspect of the person is negated, and the person instantly feels the loss of what is negated. This can take the form of feeling unable to undergo some experiences ("People were looking for someone to help them to experience whether it was love, joy, pain."). In loneliness we experience ourselves as attaining a form of self-knowledge (a sort of evaluative stance towards

our relationship with others and the world): we are relating to others and the world inadequately. When trying to make sense of this this pre-reflective experience of disconnection and inadequacy, the tendency is to find some features in the environment and some feelings that are contradictory and disconnected. There are two intentional movements at work here.

The first intentional movement is directed towards different aspects that become salient both of the world 'outside', and the feelings experienced 'inside'. A second intentionality arises from an evaluation of a disconnection between the two aspects that became salient. As mentioned in Chapter 2, we can call this a disconnection between the objective and subjective poles of intentionality. This refers to the distinction that Katz (1989) makes between these two poles as a result of his studies on the phenomenology of vision and touch. The poles reflect whether the attention is directed to the proximal stimulus or projected to the object 'out there'. Statements where the attention is directed to a distant object projected 'out there' ("I feel a pointed object out there") correspond to the objective pole of intentionality, whereas statements where the attention is directed to the proximal stimulus ("I feel a prickling sensation") correspond to the subjective pole of intentionality. We can extend this distinction between poles of intentionality to illuminate the incongruence from which loneliness arises. Of course, Katz is referring to a specific sense (be it touch or smell). However, we can also apply this disconnection to our experience.

### (3) Absence-in-presence distinguishes loneliness from other experiences that involve absence, such as social isolation

We can now say that absences are deeply connected to non-possibilities to appear in different ways in the world. It may, of course, happen that someone experiences circumstantial loneliness due to the loss of someone close. In such cases, it is the physical absence of this particular person in the world is that triggers the feeling of loneliness. However, it is also the

case that loneliness is experienced when surrounded by others. It is therefore important to distinguish the absence of another person with the absence experienced as a consequence of not appearing in the world displaying a specific aspect of the self. These considerations lead us to the third claim. The paradigmatic case that distinguishes loneliness from other experiences that involve absences is that it is experienced when surrounded by others. Researchers find this intriguing. Of course, we cannot expect to simply be able to connect with people just by being around them. So what really is more intriguing than experiencing loneliness even when around others, is that lonely people describe being around others as part of their experience of loneliness ("I was on my own. I mean, the place was full of people.") I therefore arrive at the third claim as a result of the previous two. This 'absence-in-presence' leads to a disruption of self.

In our first example, the absence of his friend at the café made Sartre experience that an aspect of himself that he was hoping would be part of the experience of that café did not have a chance to occur. This transformed the experience of the café into an experience of absence that exceeded the absence of his friend Pierre. I develop this idea in Chapter 5 but the term 'appearance' is helpful to clarify this even further. Sarah Lucas defines appearance as "what allows an individual to make the particular aspects of her situation communicable" (Lucas, 2019, p. 6). This helps distinguish between appearance and presence. Lucas argues that appearance always discloses an agent's uniqueness. It always makes "patent" the "latent" self. This does not mean she is fully transparent to herself or able to control how she appears to others. Appearance is not a matter of thinking, willing, or judging—those three operations of the mind with which Arendt is latterly concerned (Arendt, 1978). To Arendt, appearance is a form of action, but it is a special kind of action that takes place on the edge of politics, and that enables politics. Each of us has multiple identities that are subject to constant revision but which are, at the same time, marked by individual uniqueness. Individuals in association with

one another can enrich their communicative horizons through repeated mutually recognitive conversation. In other words, we are able, through talking to one another, to shore up our agency through strengthening the world (Lucas, 2019). Arendt is not only referring to concrete interactions but also to the very possibility for any kind of action and even refers to the very possibility for there even being an interaction. In this sense, presence is more than agency, it is the possibilities that exist before any act. Sartre was at the café but unable to 'appear' and for this all the possibilities that could have come with that appearance were thwarted by his friend not being there. This idea is backed up by some of the experiences shared in the study, such as those expressed by Catherine when she said: "[Lonely] people were looking for someone to help them to experience."

The examples offered by Lucas inspired in Arendt are more explicit examples of absence-in-presence. Arendt notices her loneliness in instances where she cannot amuse, spark interest or be remembered, because (for different reasons) she is being ignored and these possibilities thwarted. In the study we found another clear example of absence-in-presence when Bertha was surrounded by a family who ignored her grieving due to their own grief.

The last instance of absence-in-presence is offered by those expressed by explicit declarations that referred to being absent to oneself: "My loneliness was…I wasn't being myself."; "I couldn't see myself. I couldn't see anything." In what sense and in what ways do we appear to ourselves? These questions are considered in the final subsection of this chapter.

### 3.6. Absence on the narrative self

One of the ways in which we appear to ourselves is by making sense of our experiences, which we do, as mentioned above, by placing life events in a narrative form. The reference point that connects all those events is that they all happen to us: we assign a role to ourselves in our narratives. I will take the concept of narrative (Lysaker et al., 2003) to refer to an evolving and

storied sense of one's life. Following Jerome Bruner (1992), Lysaker et al. argue that individuals with a well-developed personal narrative can verbalize an account of themselves over time that is more complex, rich, and nuanced than simply a collection of facts (Bruner, 1992). The degree of development that a personal narrative may be corresponds to the degree to which it offers evidence of a coherent temporal flow of events and a consistent sense of self. That is, whether a person is portrayed within their narratives a unique being who acts as an agent in the world, who feels connected to others, is facing challenges, and who is moving toward any of a number of possible futures (Salvatore et al., 2004).

Loneliness may too affect the *narrative self*. Self-narrative depends on (1) having something to narrate; (2) having someone to whom to narrate (Gallagher, 2007); and, I will add, (3) a role for the self in the narrative. Some of the experiences of absence that we reviewed can affect the second and third requirements. In addition, self-narrative practices require four distinct capacities (Gallagher, 2007): (a) the capacity for temporal ordering; (b) the capacity for minimal self-reference. To begin to form a self-narrative one must be able to refer to oneself by using the first-person pronoun; (c) episodic and autobiographical memory. Both the capacity for temporal ordering and the capacity for minimal self-reference are necessary for the proper working of episodic and auto-biographical memory, which involves the recollection of a past event and when it took place; and self-attribution, the specification that the past event involves the person who is remembering it. Whatever degree of unity my life has, it is the product of an interpretation of my past actions and of events in the past that happened to me, all of which constitute my life history (Ricoeur, 1992); and (d) the capacity for metacognition, that is, an ability to gain a reflective distance from one's own experience. Gallagher (2007) argues that all four capacities are under threat in the context of solitary confinement. Among the commonly reported symptoms that result from solitary confinement are distortions in the sense of time, which can clearly affect the capacity for temporal ordering; basic disruptions in bodily

integrity, so that differentiation between self and non-self is compromised (Guenther, 2013, p. xi); impaired memory; and cognitive difficulties (concentration, confusion) that will clearly affect metacognition. In the cases of loneliness that we are analysing, none of these capacities are affected *per se*. However, the last capacity (d) was relevant for understanding the discrepancy and incongruence that loneliness involves.

What happens when we are missing someone to whom to narrate? The results of the study presented in previous chapter showed how others create possibilities for us to act and to experience. They open fields of possibilities for action. This suggested that when the other is absent, it is as if a part of the environment was absent. But the role that the other plays in the environment is fundamental to the self in a sense that a chair would not be. Every experience is a co-experience in the sense that unlike other objects in the environment, others are other points of attention, other perspectives of the world. This opens the possibilities for our experiences to be shared and communicated. This is what Catherine's role was while she was listening: she called this act helping people experience. When for different reasons this communication or sharing is not perceived as a possibility, an absence is perceived and loneliness arises. The literature on loneliness is filled with examples wherein psychologists describe their experiences of wanting to help people and expressing frustration when this seems to not be possible and results in their own experience of loneliness (e.g. Buechler, 2012). For understanding when a role is missing we need to understand some aspects of the dynamics of the narrative self.

It is possible to conceive of the narrative self as a complex product that is not fully unified (a product of incomplete summation and selective subtraction, imperfect memories and multiple reiterations), as Gallagher argues. The narrative self may be more than a simple abstract point of intersecting narratives, but also less than a unified product of a consistent narrative. The self thus conceived can provide a good model with which to explain the various

equivocations, contradictions, and struggles that find expression within an individual's personal life. At certain extremes, broken narratives may reflect certain psychopathologies. There are different perspectives on how our narratives can break and on how the self-identity can be affected. As Gallagher puts it, narratives can fail in regard to content or structure.

With regards to content, the content of self-narrative is provided by autobiographical memory and actions, but content is also shaped by expectations and plans. Without content, narratives do not exist. The contribution of autobiographical memory to self-narrative content is significant, as is apparent from cases in which such content is lost, as in amnesia. Bruner (2002; 1986) points out that dysnarrativia (encountered for example in Alzheimer's disease) is destructive for the selfhood that is generated in narrative (also see Young and Saver, 2001). In addition, dysnarrativia involves the loss of the ability to understand others' behaviour and their emotional experiences. Narrative structure, on the other hand, can mean different things although it is generally related to how narrative gets generated. Lysaker and Lysaker (2003) suggest that narrative structure derives from an internal self-dialogue which generates the self. "The self is inherently 'dialogical', or the product of ongoing conversations both within the individual and between the individual and others" (Lysaker & Lysaker, 2003, p. 209). In s chizophrenia, as these authors argue, narratives uniquely fail to situate agency within the narrator resulting in a story that is missing an agent-protagonist. "While [these] narratives…contain coherent accounts of how others are connected to one another, they fail to evolve into a story about the self as an agent that others could associate with the narrator. We speculate that this may reflect neurocognitively based difficulties maintaining the internal dialogue that propels agency as well as fears that any emergent subjectivity may be appropriated or objectified by others." (Lysaker, Wickett, Wilke & Lysaker, 2003, p. 153). They call this the absent protagonist.

Cases of loneliness are not as extreme as schizophrenia. Lonely people are protagonists of their own narratives, but we may find that one's own narrative does not fit into a wider narrative framework that incorporates others. In the words of McIntyre (1981), "For an observer, or a participant, an action has intelligibility when it can find a place in a narrative. We make sense of our own actions and of the actions of others by placing them in a narrative framework" (McIntyre, 1981), insofar as life in its worldly/situational contexts is best captured in a narrative form. I encounter the other person not abstracted from their circumstances but in the middle of something that has a beginning and that is going somewhere. I see them in the framework of a story in which either I do or do not have a part to play. Narratives are, by definition, socially constructed through conversations with others including family, friends, and community members and thus require social exchange to remain vital. With fewer social contacts, it would seem natural that there would be less opportunity to talk about one's life as it is unfolding; thus, the depth that comes with the telling and retelling of narrative would be eroded. This reveals another defining characteristics of loneliness: the phenomenology of loneliness includes a *powerlessness over our personal narrative* due to not having found a role in the collective narrative with others. As much of social connection involves the sharing of one's stories of oneself, with diminishing narrative, there would seem fewer ways to form connections with others (Bruner, 1992) and fewer opportunities to see possibilities for action in the world. This also explains why some people experience loneliness at specific transitional times in their lives (e.g. during pregnancy) or as a consequence of having experienced trauma and the necessity to share that specific experience with specific people (not everyone).

### 3.7. Summary

This chapter provided a philosophical analysis of the three main claims that resulted from the study on loneliness. First, I argued that in loneliness the experience of absence results in a disruption of self because our way of being together and understanding each other is co-determined in its meaning by our interactions with others and the situations in which we find ourselves in the world. When our perception of this situation is affected by different instances of absence, this has a direct impact on our own possibilities of being. Second, I argued that incongruence and disconnection arise as part of the experience of lonely people. When they try to make sense of the experience of absence disconnection and inadequacy, the features of the environment and feelings that become salient reflect this experience of disconnection. Third, lonely people experience absence in presence because, while there is proximity with others, different things are affected: their possibilities to 'appear' (what allows the individual to make particular aspects of her situation communicable to others) are thwarted; and their self-narratives are affected in different ways the most important being that one's own narrative does not fit in a wider narrative framework that incorporates others. This results in a sense of powerlessness over one's own narrative.

# 4

# Solitude as a Positive Experience: Empowerment and Agency[13]

## 4.1 Abstract

What distinguishes experiences of solitude from experiences of loneliness? And what makes solitude a positive experience? I review some of the literature on the benefits of solitude, focusing on freedom, creativity, and spirituality. Then, I argue that the relationship between agent and environment is an important factor in determining the quality of experiences of solitude. In particular, I find that solitude may support a person's sense of agency, expanding the possibilities for action that a person has, and creating the conditions for authenticity. I describe a phenomenology of solitude, exploring the nature of experiences of loneliness and solitude in a religious community. One finding is that solitude is characterised by presence, whereas loneliness is characterised by absence; another is that solitude can contribute to a sense of empowerment that enables agents to pursue and achieve the goals they find valuable.

## 4.2 Solitude and loneliness

In a recent article in *Psyche*, Susanne Sener describes her experience of living alone in a cabin on a mountain in Colorado, for twenty-eight years:

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[13] [13] This chapter is a slightly revised version of a paper co-written with Lisa Bortolotti forthcoming in the journal *Methodo* on *Positive Feelings on the Border between Phenomenology, Psychology and Virtue Ethics.* Lisa Bortolotti contributed with her expertise on agency. All that is related to solitude is my own contribution.

> I didn't move to the mountain with the goal of being alone. I moved here because the cabin was an affordable place to live while I fulfilled a four-year teaching assignment at a university 20 miles away. The resulting solitude was an unexpected discovery, then an unexpected benefit. At the end of those four years, I left my career and a brief marriage because mountain life was even more appealing than either of those.[14]

What are the *unexpected benefits* of solitude? How can we make sense of solitude as a positive experience? There are two different constructs related to being alone: solitude and loneliness. However, being alone is not a necessary condition for solitude or loneliness, as one can experience solitude or feel lonely in the presence of others. Understanding the benefits of solitude is part of the same project as understanding the differences between the experience of solitude and the experience of loneliness. Solitude has been regarded as *healthy aloneness* (Tillich, 1963), whilst loneliness is sometimes described as *pathological aloneness*, for instance when it is linked to depression. Due to its potentially harmful nature, loneliness has been the object of much psychological research, whereas solitude has been relatively neglected. The research on solitude suggests that solitude is experienced positively because the freedom it affords facilitates creativity, reflection, and spirituality. Solitude has been described as a state of relative social disengagement – disengagement from the immediate demands of other people – and is usually characterized by decreased social inhibitions and increased freedom to choose mental and physical activities (Long and Averill, 2003). Sener remarks on the freedom she gained by moving away from the city: "Mostly I am still, basking in the absolute silence, unobserved by others, answering only to the mountain and to myself. The freedom is absolute, and it is exquisite."

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[14] Sener, S. (2020). My three decades alone, basking in the company of a mountain. Aeon, 28th May. URL: https://psyche.co/ideas/my-three-decades-alone-basking-in-the-company-of-a-mountain (accessed August 2020).

From a broad social perspective, the benefits of solitude often outweigh its costs (Koch, 1994; Storr, 1989). For instance, solitude can reduce the need to conform to patterns of behaviour. Stillness, silence, and freedom from the constraints imposed by determined social roles are all themes we shall address here, as well as the idea that solitude is characterised by the presence of deeper connections and not an absence of connections. I focus on such features of solitude because I am interested in what makes solitude a positive experience—and what makes solitude distinct from loneliness. I believe that the impact of solitude on the sense of agency is a key issue and suggest that solitude can make agents feel *empowered*.

In section 4.2, I review the literature on freedom, creativity, and spirituality as potential benefits of solitude. In section 4.3, I discuss how the quality of the experience of solitude depends on the complex relationship between personal characteristics and features of the environment. In section 4.4, I illustrate the previously described features of the experience of solitude by referring to an empirical study conducted in a group of religious women. We conclude that expanding possibilities for action and removing the constraints set by determined social roles may enable people to start a journey whose end is to find a self that feels authentic. This may result in feeling empowered to make their own contribution to the goals they find valuable.

## 4.3 Benefits of solitude

Here, I consider some of the reasons that solitude is described as a positive experience (Long and Averill 2003). Solitude has been linked to freedom, creativity, and spirituality.

### *4.3.1. Freedom*

The distinction between positive and negative freedom (Berlin, 1969) is useful for understanding how solitude can be experienced positively. Negative freedom is understood as

*freedom from* constraints, whereas positive freedom is *freedom to* engage in the desired activities—it depends on the presence of resources, whether internal (such as education) or external (such as financial security). The presence of others can either impose constraints on agents or provide the necessary resources for agents to pursue their goals.

Long and Averill offer examples of several studies, indicating that having to coordinate with others can be experienced as a constraint. This suggests that solitude can be appreciated as a source of negative freedom. For instance, your experience of observing a painting in an art gallery changes when another person walks up to the same painting (Koch, 1994). You become conscious not only of the painting you are observing, but also of yourself as a viewer. Solitude can minimize forms of intrusive self-consciousness by reducing the immediate demands of experiencing oneself as the object of another person's thoughts and actions. Other studies have shown that people have decreased self-awareness when they are alone (Larson et al., 1982; Larson, 1990).[151] So agents may seek solitude to reduce the possibilities of experiencing themselves as the object of someone else's actions and thoughts. But they may also choose to withdraw from social interactions or become immersed in nature to benefit from stillness, silence and space gaining more autonomy, privacy, and choice with respect to their thoughts and actions (Hammitt & Madden, 1989). This suggests that solitude can be appreciated as a source of positive freedom. In two different studies, university students (Long, 2000) and backpackers (Hammitt, 1982) indicated *freedom of choice with respect to their own actions and thoughts* among the most important benefits of their experience of solitude. We will see in section 4.4 that solitude can be associated with conditions that facilitate self-reflection, self-discovery, and even self-transformation.

[1] The studies by Larson et al. (1982) and Larson (1990) use the Experience Sampling Method: researchers send signals to electronic pagers worn by participants, and these signals direct the participants to complete a report about what they were doing and how they felt at the moment the signal was received.

One important caveat to our discussion of freedom as a benefit of solitude is that people often report increased negative mood when they are alone (Larson et al., 1982; Larson, 1990). This reminds us that "to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by solitude, a person must be able to turn a basically terrifying state of being into a productive one" (Larson, 1990, p. 52) and "(positive) *freedom to* engage in a particular activity requires more than simply a *freedom from* constraints or interferences: it requires the capacity to use solitude constructively" (Long and Averill, 2003, p. 25).

*4.3.2. Creativity*

Pop culture associates creativity with solitude: the scientist in the laboratory, the painter in the studio, the writer in a cabin in the woods (similar to Sener's case). Developing creative talents such as playing musical instruments or writing poetry seems to rely on the capacity to be alone (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Agents live in highly structured environments: the places they inhabit and the people they interact with reinforce their identities and narratives. If environmental influences are altered or reduced, or distance is created between the agent and the environment, mental structures are affected as well, and this may allow a different organization of thought. Thus, creativity can be facilitated by stimulating imaginative involvement in alternative realities (Schutz, 1945). According to Long and Averill, imaginative involvement in an alternative identity requires de-structuring of particular modes of consciousness that involve the sense of time, experience of self, and form of sociality. Some cognitive characteristics associated with solitude (e.g., limited sociality, limited intersubjectivity, personal time perspective) offer opportunities for making transitions from social worlds to potentially creative worlds of scientific theorizing and fantasy.[2]

Self-attunement and self-reflection are also facilitated by solitude (Koch, 1994). When people are detached from their usual social and physical environments, or when these environments are altered, people gain a new understanding of themselves and their priorities. This results into a reconceptualization of the self, potentially leading to self-transformation (Storr, 1989). Research on isolation during Antarctic expeditions and in sensory deprivation contexts (Barabasz, 1991; Suedfeld, 1982) illustrates how solitude can lead to self-transformation.[163] During sensory deprivation, the solitary mind may be better attuned to, or more likely to generate daydreams, shifting emotions, novel thoughts and associations that contribute to creativity (Suedfeld, 1982, p. 64). Needless to say, most solitude experiences do not approach the extreme levels of sensory deprivation. However, the solitude of a sensory deprivation chamber and solitude in more familiar environments share certain features; most important, perhaps, are the relative novelty of the situation, the relative absence of externally imposed structure, and the increased salience of internally generated thoughts and feelings.

*4.3.3. Spirituality*

Enhanced spirituality is one of the benefits most popularly associated with solitude (Long and Averill, 2003). Documented cases include those of religious mystics and prophets such as the Buddha, Mohammed, Jesus and Moses who have reported divine communion in solitude (e.g., Suedfeld, 1982). Solitary meditation has been practiced individually and collectively by nuns, monks and devotees of numerous religions (France, 1997; Merton, 1956). Tribal cultures

[3] Some members of an Antarctic research team were exposed to three weeks of almost complete isolation while doing field research; another group was part of a nine-person party who spent the winter staffing a largely deserted research station (Barabasz, 1991). Following their period of isolation, members from both teams made such comments as "[I] could make my own stories, live them in my mind as if they were real life," "I could block things out easier"; "I had more vivid daydreams"; "I could concentrate on what was there better and get absorbed in it better" (Barabasz, 1991, p. 213).

include solitary quests for higher levels of consciousness in their adolescents' rites of passage.

The link between solitude and spirituality has been studied in religious solitaries from distinct cultural perspectives (France, 1997). When experiencing the relative social freedom and lowered inhibitions of solitude, people can focus on spiritual concerns. Solitude enhances their ability to contemplate their place in the universe and their own thoughts and desires. Taoists as well as Christian hermits value solitude because they believe it replaces the distorting pressures of society with the healing power of nature which allows for insight, freedom, and creative self-transformation. In these traditions, the significance of solitude for spiritual development is often made explicit.

> [A monk] poured some water in to a vase and said: 'Just look at this water.' They did, and it was murky. A little later he said to them: 'See now how the water is cleared.' And they could see their faces in it like a mirror. And he said to them: 'This is like the man who lives among other men and because of their turbulence cannot see his own sins, yet when he lives alone, especially in the desert, he can see his failings' (France, 1997, p. 27).

As the mystical experiences of the solitary voyagers and the tribal solitary rites of passage, the clarification of the water in the monk's vase illustrates the belief that solitude facilitates not only spiritual insight, but also a deeper knowledge of the self.

Finally, spirituality is also about feelings of connectedness. Whether in a forest, in a monastery, or at home, solitary people can withdraw into the intimacy of a spiritual encounter with themselves, their environment, or their God. This shows that, perhaps counterintuitively and differently from loneliness, solitude has a social nature. Followers of a wide range of spiritual traditions have relied on solitude to gain a better insight into themselves or to seek a connection with another.

### 4.4. The person and the environment

What factors determine whether an experience of solitude is positive? Is it the nature of the environment where people experience solitude, or the nature of the people who experience solitude?

*4.4.1. Solitude, choice, and control*

Neither solitude nor loneliness requires that the person is objectively alone. People can feel lonely or experience solitude even amongst family or within the mechanisms of modern institutions. However, *aloneness* is a typical aspect of the experience of solitude. After studying the effects of compulsory or enforced solitude (such as those experienced in solitary confinement), Shaun Gallagher and Bruce Janz (2018) [17]ask whether it is a willingness to be alone that distinguishes solitude from loneliness and makes solitude a positive experience. Is solitude good in virtue of being *a choice*? Does a person exercise autonomy and control in the experience of solitude? Gallagher and Janz propose that, in order to understand the relationship between solitude and agency, we need to think of the self in relation to the environment and focus on the notion of autonomy. In particular, practices that involve aloneness will result in changes in the possibilities for action that agents perceive in a given environment. Such changes may increase or decrease the autonomy of agents.

Loneliness may be seen as an experience of aloneness that is not chosen but imposed by worldly circumstances and results in impoverished perceptions of what possibilities the agent has for action. Solitude may be seen, instead, as an experience of aloneness that is chosen and results into an enriched perception of what possibilities the agent has for action. Social psychology—and in particular, the literature on positive illusions (Taylor, 1989), self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006), and self-affirmation (Haushofer and Fehr, 2014)—teaches us that, to face challenges effectively, people need to believe that they can change things for the better, and in order to do so they need to have a sense of competence, control, and efficacy that motivates

[17] I discuss the details of this proposal in the last chapter.

them to act, combined with a sense that their goals are both desirable and attainable.

Circumstances in which people's sense of agency is supported and enhanced, for instance circumstances in which they reflect on previous successes and acquire beliefs about their capacity to achieve challenging goals or overcome obstacles, have a beneficial effect on their perseverance in pursuing the goals that they may initially fail to achieve, enhancing their resilience (Bortolotti, 2018). Perhaps surprisingly, solitude seems to have similar effects as optimism in that it fosters productivity, mastery, creativity, and even pro-social behaviour. W hy? Recent research from the Solitude Lab provides some initial answers. We know from the optimism literature that for the motivation to pursue their goals to be sustained, agents must deal "with the stressful circumstances of daily life with the resources conferred by a positive sense of self" (Taylor and Sherman, 2008, p.59). Solitude seems to reduce stress, and help people feel calm and relaxed (Nguyen et al., 2018), decreasing high-arousal emotions. Solitude has been linked to wellbeing and other positive outcomes when it is a choice on behalf of the agent, both in the sense that it is the agent who decides to be alone, and that it is the agent who decides how to spend the time they have on their own (Nguyen et al., 2020). This form of autonomous solitude is likely to contribute to effective coping at critical times.

*4.4.2. The solitude niche*

Given its situational and contextual variables, solitude has been described as an *ecological niche,* offering both opportunities and dangers (Larson et al., 1982). The characteristics of the creature who aims to thrive in a given environment will be a factor contributing to whether the creature will enjoy opportunities or face dangers. One proposal is that, to make best use of solitude, a person must have achieved certain age-related capabilities (Long and Averill, 2003). The three most important features are: (a) the successful negotiation of attachment processes in infancy; (b) the capacity for advanced reasoning skills; and (c) the development of the propensity for reflexive thought, as influenced by previous social interactions.

On this view, solitude experiences are not solely determined by the developmental and personal characteristics of the agent. Rather, the *solitude niche* is captured most fully in the interaction of the agent's characteristics with the attributes of a specific solitary setting. In a situation of reduced social stimulation, a person whose characteristics facilitate feelings of comfort and control over their particular surroundings is more likely to find solitude rewarding than a person prone to feel at the mercy of that specific environment. Famous solitaries have mastered challenging physical environments, but other experiences of solitude are more mundane. This interplay between personal characteristics and features of the environment also begins to explain the common observation that some people claim to want more solitude and yet often their mood drops when they are alone; other people fear and avoid solitude but then thrive in it. People tend to idealize conditions that, if realized, they might find difficult to tolerate; or expect the worse from conditions that are very different from those they currently experience, only to find that they soon 'settle' and come to appreciate their new condition.

According to Long and Averill, personality characteristics (e.g., openness to novel emotions) and developmental milestones (e.g., attachment capabilities and identity-related achievements) increase the agent's chances to make good use of time spent alone, but the construal of the solitude experience and the agent's interpretation of it make a difference as well. In an environment of decreased social input, inner life (e.g., memories, interests, self-related beliefs) will be responsible for the content of the agent's immediate experience. If solitary people can rely on their beliefs to maintain sufficient feelings of control and security in their connection to society, then they can use the freedom afforded by solitude for a range of potentially beneficial purposes. However, if their beliefs result in anxiety, due to lack of volition or social disconnection, they will likely retreat into loneliness or look for surrogate experiences of sociality (such as those offered by mass media or communication technology).

## 4.5 The phenomenology of solitude

I have already discussed some of the benefits of solitude identified in the psychological and philosophical literature and paid special attention to how solitude can impact agency. I now want to make a novel suggestion, that solitude can lead to a sense of empowerment, discussing an ideographic, in-depth study, illustrating how loneliness and solitude are experienced in the context of a religious community.

The study is composed of semi-structured interviews conducted with six participants. The resultant transcripts were subjected to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (see section 2.12). The analysis points to loneliness as a deeply felt, distressing experience of absence that prevents one from fully experiencing oneself; and to solitude as a pleasant experience of stillness, silence, lightness, power and energy that leads to openness, freedom, authenticity of self, and feelings of deeper connection. The study indicates a distinct *phenomenology of solitude*. Interestingly, the experiences of solitude recounted in the interviews illustrate and flesh out the benefits mentioned in previous sections, where the phenomenology of solitude is intertwined with a person's sense of agency. Gallagher and Janz note that if we think about solitude "simply in terms of whether someone wills or does not will to be alone, that is, in terms of an individual's free will or autonomy, it's not clear how that difference makes such a profound difference to the experience of solitude itself" (2018, p. 160). But autonomy is more than being willing or unwilling to do something. I suggest that solitude *supports* a person's sense of agency, allowing for a sense of *empowerment*.

### *4.5.1. The context of solitude*

The overarching aim of the study was to understand experiences of loneliness and solitude. This included considering the consequences of loneliness and solitude, and the psychosocial processes that allow people to cope or thrive. This was achieved by studying experiences of isolation and connectedness in the context of a religious community. These experiences of

solitude are, therefore, situated in a specific institutional context. Contexts set implicit (and sometimes explicit) social expectations and rules, but people often make their own choices within those contexts. The choice to join a religious community could be seen as similar to the choice of withdrawing to a secluded world. However, in the course of the interviews it became clear that for the religious women who participated in the study, becoming nuns was akin to choosing an environment that would allow them to explore new worlds, realizing their most authentic selves.

The life of the Catholic nun Sor Juana Ines de La Cruz (1651?–1695) offers an historical illustration of such type of choice. Sor Juana is among the first five lyric poets in the Spanish language. Her life was driven by the need to learn, a natural inclination that she thought God had put in her. But the prohibition against women's learning in Mexico at the time meant that she was self-taught from an early age. The breadth of her concerns includes explicit awareness of limitations imposed on women because of gender, as well as women's need for education. In 1669 she entered the Convent of Saint Paula of the Order of Jerome. "It was from this convent that Sor Juana won international fame for her literary talents and erudition – and it was indeed a type of safe haven until her difficult last years, when she was caught up in a damaging public battle about her lifelong dedication to letters and learning" (Boyle, 2016, p. 67).

The study provided us with the opportunity to reflect on how experiences of withdrawal from some worlds can open gates to others. The main line of enquiry for my study was: how do you experience and understand your experiences of loneliness and solitude in the context of a religious community?

### *4.5.2. Solitude as a pleasant experience of stillness, silence, lightness, and energy that requires space*

**(a) Stillness and silence**

All the sisters refer to stillness and silence as features of their own experience of solitude. In the following passage, Sister Catherine describes a retreat centre where she worked for several years. She refers to the distinction between loneliness and solitude:

> SC: Honestly, I can only say, the truth shows when you "come away with me to a quiet place and rest" you've almost got to bring a person. And that's probably why the retreat was so good because that's what it was doing. The drive up to the main street was 1 mile long. One mile! To the drive! […]
>
> They came to a quiet place…to rest. And it's the same thing even here in the middle of …all these people who are working here. And still in the middle of a crowd! You can be so lonely but you can say: "come with me to a quiet place and rest." And if that's god calling you just sense you're going into the presence, just come with me and rest. And be, just be aware, God took us, he is holding us in existence, isn't he?

Sister Catherine is rephrasing a quote from the bible, 'come away with me to a quiet place and rest,' suggesting that even when withdrawing, one is not necessarily alone (feeling lonely). Sister Catherine talks about making a journey and reaching a place that is both physical (the retreat after the drive to the mountain) and metaphorical (a peaceful and quiet state of mind, achieved when one gets away from the demands of a busy life).

Similarly, Sister Augusta distinguishes between loneliness and solitude:

> SA: But solitude…loneliness... I don't know. Loneliness…Yes. I used to feel lonely but then I realized, as I've got older, that I valued the silence. It's…we are in the silence and there's more…more there's… you can't be lonely in the silence. And then there's a silence, you know, a heart silence. Not just around the heart but right inside the heart. And you can't be lonely when you're in that silence. You know, it's a deeper, deeper, deeper, deeper kind of silence. […]
> VM: I'm very interested in this deeper silence. You place it in the heart.

> SA: Yeah. It's out of the head, you see. It's with the heart that one sees rightly. What's significant is invisible to the head or the eye.

As Sister Augusta says, loneliness ended when she started valuing the silence. The sisters associate silence with stillness, and not with the restlessness that, as we saw, they associate with the experience of loneliness. A more thorough investigation of the pre-reflective aspects of the experience of silence is needed, but it is important to see that Sister Augusta refers to things that we do not immediately perceive with our senses, that are still of value and part of our experiences. When Sister Augusta says silence is something "we are in", this suggests belongingness rather than detachment.

> SA: Well, the silence is all around us. If we sat here for an hour… We would be fine. And we would be richer at the end. We wouldn't have to talk… There's a lot…If you go on a silent retreat…and I've been on a 30 day retreat. You go on a silent retreat and you are not speaking to anybody. You see people walk around and you're doing communal things, you're eating in the dining room and you're praying in a praying room or you find a quiet space away from everybody…you go out to be outside to be alone. And then you're… somehow you know that all these people are doing the same kind of thing and you feel connected to them in a deeper way and we haven't said one word, we don't even know each other. You know, there's that deeper connection.

After mentioning different levels of connection during the interview, Sister Augusta tells us how her experience on a silent retreat where she was sharing silence with others made her experience a deeper kind of connection. One can enjoy solitude in the company of others. So, experiences of solitude are characterised by silence and stillness, and they lead to a deeper sense of connection. Stillness and silence in this context are more than the absence of movement or sounds, they are something to be valued, states people are in, suggesting a sense of belongingness associated with the experience of presence.

**(b) Lightness, power, and energy**

The analysis above reveals a connection between solitude and the experience of presence. This presence is described by the sisters as a sense of physical energy, lightness, and 'life force'. The experience is also described with visual characteristics such as brightness; and with emotion words such as joy and happiness. Sister Bernice expresses the feeling of lightness:

> SB: If you go to the mountains…and even sit. Sometimes if you just sit just in the garden. All alone. And you just kind of, you just think…just you wait, the trees and you look at, kind of, you can see you're in a different, you kind of… you raise up above.

There is a variation as to what the source of this energy is across the interviews. At times, it is described as *something from the inside* that pulls them towards God. At other times, it is described as an *external force* coming from God, the holy spirit, nature, or other people.

**(c) Space**

As reflected in all the descriptions of solitude, there is an element of spaciousness involved. It does not have to involve physical distance—as we saw, space can be created by silence—but it often does. Another type of connection that emerged in the analysis is with nature. This is evident in how the qualities of trees and flowers are described in terms of richness, energy, and solidness. Being outdoors is associated with feeling enough space to breathe, and breathing is identified as a fundamental aspect of the experience of solitude that can be experienced outdoors in the mountains, the woods or other places in nature, or indoors in one's own home or the convent. In the interviews, stillness, silence, lightness, power, and energy are all described as experiences *of presence* and are all connected to God. The sisters talk about their preferences for where they experience solitude, as in the following from Sister Bernice.

> SB: If you go to the mountains…and even sit. Sometimes if you just sit just in the garden. All alone. And you just kind of, you just think…just you wait, the trees and you look at, kind of, you can see you're in a different, you kind of plat…kind of… you raise up above. [... ] We don't give ourselves time. Sometimes, it's that thing. You're alone with god. Alone with this creation that we call it. You're alone with this creation. And you are on a different level.

The passage is a perfect example of how being in solitude is intertwined with experiencing nature, experiencing God and a new level of connectedness. To sum up, in the interviews experiences of solitude are not experiences of loneliness because they are characterised by presence, not absence.

### *4.5.3. Solitude as leading to openness, freedom, authenticity of self and a feeling of a deeper connection*

**(a) Authenticity and freedom**

Sister Augusta explains how she experiences solitude in relation to the woods and the trees:

> SA: But the solitude is finding…like I can go to the woods, I find woods very… a place where there's a richness, there's an energy there's uhm…the trees, I think… their solidness. There's something about… they kind of speak to you.

Sister Augusta also describes solitude in an enclosed space, at home. Here she talks about the time when she had to share a house with another sister.

> SA: But we got on. And then she would go away for a weekend, her friends would come and she go away for a weekend, and I'd have the house to myself (sigh of relief). Oh, space! Space! Great! Oh, I was just breathing...the space. I'd walk around and say: "Bliss! This is lovely. I love the space. I love shutting the door. Shutting the world out. Just leave me here and let me just be and think and pray and read and…not bother." It was wonderful.

As we saw, the feeling of having 'enough space to breathe' can be experienced outdoors and indoors, because both being immersed in nature and being indoors can offer the possibility for "shutting the world out", as Sister Augusta says. The world referred to here is the social world. But "shutting the world out" is not painful as in social isolation: it is "blissful" because it is seen as an opening of multiple possibilities for action that are not determined by preconceived social roles. Shutting the world out is a choice and what agents look for by doing so is a temporal experience that enables them to have contact with themselves in order to achieve a state where they are at their best. Freedom here is the freedom to explore multiple possibilities outside preconceived social roles in order to optimize the experience of self. This is described by Sister Augusta.

> SA: I meet people … I'm not looking for anything from people in that sense because I'm satisfied on, on my own. I'm not searching out there, "will you be my friend?" If I have friends, it's great. But I'm not going around looking … "Can I get everything from you?" No. I'm offering myself out there with other people and, and that kind … dynamic can be harmonious and…be there and make the world a better place … in some way.

Sister Catherine expresses her solitude as a choice, making the relation to the self even clearer.

> SC: So I would take myself to…other people would go to the garden. No, I just like the church. So sometimes I would go where the choir at the top…and I find myself. But I regularly do that. And especially if there is something…maybe…I just want to be able to be open, to be free, to be the person that god has made me.

Sister Catherine's words reveal something more about what people seeking solitude are ultimately looking for. Journeys in solitude are journeys that take someone (usually oneself) on a quest. We may wonder what this quest is about: "… and I find myself". Catherine talks about being open, being free, being the person she is meant to be. This suggests a search for

authenticity but also for a fullness of experience.

**(b) Deeper connections**

The analysis shows varying levels of intimacy in the connections with the social world, nature, and God. In the experience of solitude, connections with the social world are determined by roles from which it is possible to withdraw in different ways. Unlike in the experience of loneliness, there is no perception of absence in this withdrawal. This can be understood as an experience of freedom from the restraints of the social world. Answering the call is a choice: "Some women choose to be single. It is called single vocation." This choice is being in the service of others, to be the most authentic for others. Being there for others is embedded in this very choice to be oneself. Relinquishing this 'call' is interpreted as not allowing the possibilities that can be open to someone who is not constrained by preconceived social roles and denying the possibility to fully experience themselves.

The connection with God provides the most intimate level of connection, as it is the basis for any other experience or connection and the possibility of making sense of any experience. Answering the call is a response to God, but also a way to be oneself. It is a *reciprocal movement*. The call is described as something felt in the body (an energy of mutual attraction) that participants find difficult to describe. Sister Margaretta says:

> There's always been something in me that was a pull towards god, and it's always been there, I didn't have to put it on like a coat, it's been inside me.

Descriptions in relation to body and space are predominant ("there's always been something in me that was a pull towards God, and it's always been there, I didn't have to put it on like a coat, it's been inside me"). God is related to the opportunity that the *here and now* gives to integrate, to understand, to find meaning, and to be with other people as oneself. The sense of deeper connection is felt with both with oneself and with God, as we see in the following from Sister

Catherine:

> SC: Now, you know just to be as real as I can possibly be here and now. And that's what I… that's how I find…that's very much my kind of spirituality. And that's how my that's where I find my strength is in prayer. But the prayer… and it's not going to say a big prayer, not at all. I just sit there, be still and know. Always hear: "just be still"…and know that I am God. Because it just comes from him. So that's the spiritual, spiritual side of it. And the, uhm…the closeness and the power. You know the holy spirit is this kind of…it's very much… he's guiding everything. And…so that's been it throughout my life.

*4.5.4. Solitude as empowerment*

The interviews concern a kind of *power* that the sisters feel in themselves and that reflects their own personal skills and qualities, whose successful deployment they largely attribute to God. This is described as a capacity to enable others, to be empowered in one's mission, to see what other people cannot see and achieve what other people find difficult or impossible. This power is enhanced by solitude and for the sisters finally realising that they have that power is the end result of a long process in which self-reflection plays in important part. Solitude enables them to discover and exercise that power. Sister Augusta illustrates these points:

> I'm here in the here and now I have opportunities to make … integrate as much as possible and to understand and find meaning in my life so that I can then be … um, somebody who is … I can be there with other people as me. It could be as an enabler but I offer that kind of …

> I'm not looking … when I meet people … I'm not looking for anything from people in that sense because I'm satisfied on, on my own. I'm not searching out there, "will you be my friend?" If I have friends, it's great. But I'm not going around looking … "Can I get everything from you?" No. I'm offering myself out there with other people and, and that kind … dynamic can be harmonious and … be there and make the world a better place … in some way.

This is echoed by Sister Catherine:

> SC: And all the time I just felt … an empowerment. You know, there was a strength or a power that was way beyond me. But there was a power within me …
>
> When I say I was empowered off the power of the holy spirit working within me. Because, how can I just say it … um … with God, I can do anything. You know, I can do what He's asking me to do. But I'm just aware that … His spirit. He's not going to just ask me to do anything I'm not capable of doing. And that … I've always had … there was always a kind of confirmation when I was going to … the retreat centre when Sister A. said: "Catherine, you will be very good with people. Don't worry about what you're going to be asked to do. You're good with people and whatever you'll be asked to do you're going to do it because you won't be asked to do anything you're not capable of doing so just have that confidence … just have confidence in yourself that whatever you'll be asked to do, you're going to be able to do it because you have got this …" How can I say? I'm probably much more a 'yes' woman.

Both passages convey the power of agency that the sisters felt at different times in their lives when they achieved something that was appreciated by others. They talk of "opportunities", "making the world a better place", "confidence", "being able to do anything", being an "enabler", "empowerment" and "strength", which are suggestive of the altruism, mastery and productivity usually associated with people developing a strong sense of themselves as competent agents. The sisters often attribute this to a higher force (God or the holy spirit), but it is significant that they are the means by which valuable goals are accomplished.

We see in this passage from Sister Margaretta an illustration of altruism. She expresses feeling honoured to see an accomplishment that she enabled:

> I had a class of 51. There were 12 of them, very clever, then there was average and then there were 2 who couldn't manage. And eventually my good headmistress, she got somebody in to take away the 12. There was this lad, poor fellow, he couldn't read, and I taught him to read, and I could see, he came up to the desk and he read, and I said: "Oh, John, that is great." And there was all this smile in his face. I can still see the smile. What a great honour.

This feeling is echoed by all the sisters. In this passage from Sister Bernice we see that her altruism does not prevent her from being unique:

> We were going over a bridge and there was this young girl sitting in the bridge begging. And I had a coin or something in my pocket, and I gave it to her. And she looked up at me. Now, my brother was with me, he just passed on, that was fine, I wouldn't say anything. It's fine. That was it. We possibly passed them many times more. But it was just that smile. Was enough. It was God. I can still see her. You know that kind of feeling? When you just say thank you, God is … [there to] help you to do it. It's not myself; it's not me, I don't get proud because I did it, I just get [opens her eyes and mouth expressing awe] I was used to do it.

Sister Bernice distinguishes herself from her brother. She is able to see and experience something he is not: the look in the other person's eye and the experience of awe. Awe is an experiences that solitude provides space for. Awe in the analysis emerged as including knowledge and humility.

The sisters often remark how they discovered themselves when they experienced solitude, how they reflected on themselves, and felt connected at those times. There are several ways of expressing the circumstances of this discovery. "I love shutting the door. Shutting the world out. Just leave me here and let me just be and think and pray and read and…not bother. It was wonderful."; "I just want to be able to be open, to be free, to be the person that god has made me. Now, you know just to be as real as I can possibly be here and now."; "Because

silence helps you to look at what's going on in here. (points at her heart) [And that] makes us understand what we are about, really."

### 4.6 Summary

There is some literature on the benefits of solitude partially and briefly reviewed here, but no systematic attempt has been made to explain why solitude (differently from loneliness) is perceived and conceptualised as a positive experience. Rather, this chapter makes a novel suggestion, based on (a) previous work pointing at autonomy, freedom, and connectedness as key features of solitude; and on (b) the phenomenology of solitude experiences investigated in an empirical study of loneliness and solitude in a religious community. The suggestion is that solitude is a positive experience because (differently from loneliness) it is an experience of presence and it supports a person's sense of agency, leading to the person feeling empowered.

# 5

# The Fragility of Presence, and the Power of Withdrawing from the World and Connecting with Oneself

## 5.1 Abstract

This chapter provides an in-depth exploration of the nature of presence experienced in solitude. I develop theoretical accounts for the main claims that resulted from the analysis of the experience of solitude, as follows: (1) in solitude there is a connection between the experience of presence and appearing in the world as a unique agent; presence is achieved and involves more than appearing; (2) solitude allows for a sense of connection with oneself; (3) in solitude there is an interplay between independence and dependence on others; (4) solitude allows for an experience of silence that is different from a voiceless silence; and (5) the change of environments that happens in solitude allows individuals to display different and particular aspects of their self. This not only reinforces their sense of autonomy but also widens their

perception of possibilities.

## 5.2. Introduction

The previous chapter described the phenomenology of solitude as understood by a group of interviewees living in a religious community. Since the intention was to highlight the positive aspects of solitude, I focused on the benefits of the experience. I argued that the relationship between agent and environment is an important factor in determining the quality of experiences of solitude, especially because it may support a person's sense of agency, expanding the possibilities for action that a person has and removing the constraints set by determined social constraints. I also suggested a novel finding to add to the benefits of solitude: it can contribute to a sense of empowerment that enables agents to pursue and achieve the goals they find valuable and to realise their most authentic selves.

The results of the study also connect solitude to experiences of presence in opposition to the absence experienced in loneliness. This chapter provides an in-depth exploration of the nature of presence experienced in solitude. The results indicate that it leads to a deeper sense of connection. The analysis presents different levels and dimensions of connection. Connections can be established with the social world, with nature, with God and with oneself. Relationships with the social world are determined by roles and it is possible to withdraw from them in different ways. Unlike in the experience of loneliness, there is no perception of absence in this withdrawal. The natural world provides an opportunity to reconnect with other possibilities of being that are not determined by the previously established social Other. It is through this detachment that another space is created. This space leads to openness, freedom, and authenticity of self and to a feeling of deeper connection. Just as I did in chapter 2 with loneliness, in this chapter I develop theoretical accounts for the main claims that resulted from

the analysis of the experience of solitude: (1) *in solitude there is a connection between the experience of presence and appearing in the world as a unique agent; presence is achieved and involves more than appearing; (2) solitude allows for a sense of connection with oneself; (3) in solitude there is an interplay between independence and dependence on others; (4) solitude allows for an experience of silence that is different from a voiceless silence; and (5) the change of environments that happens in solitude allows for individuals to display different and particular aspects of their self. This not only reinforces their sense of autonomy but also widens their perception of possibilities.* This chapter analyses the first four claims. I explore the fifth claim in Chapter 6.

> **(1) In solitude there is a connection between the experience of presence and appearing in the world as a unique agent; The experience of presence entails more than agency; Presence is fragile yet achievable.**

The result of the analysis of the experiences of solitude discussed by the sisters points to solitude as a pleasant experience of stillness, silence, lightness, power and energy, described as experiences of presence. What does this experience exactly entail?

### 5.3. Presence, agency and appearance

Different concepts of presence are taken by different authors to make reference to the experience of loneliness. In Chapter 3, I mentioned Thomas Dumm (2010), who builds on Hannah Arendt's conception of loneliness as loss of the common world, and develops his own definition of loneliness as "the existential realisation of a strange fantasy—the loss of self, world, experience, and thought" (Dumm, 2010, p. 45). He sees a paradox in this and describes it as the inability to be "present in the present moment." Alternatively, Sarah Lucas (2018) proposes that presence can be regained through our actions in the world. Lucas argues that when we act, we appear in the world as unique individuals. Two things happen simultaneously

during this appearance: one, an *agent* understands that she appears as unique; and two, the *world* experiences the agent's uniqueness. Being present in the moment might therefore be understood as experiencing one's own uniqueness; feeling, in other words, as though one can add something to the common world. Appearance, then, occurs when the four prerequisites for being—self, world, experience, and thought—are satisfied. Appearance is thus the exercise of ontological agency (Lucas, 2018). For Lucas, appearance is equated with presence and inseparable from some action that is *acknowledged* in the world. Appearance is an interesting concept that originates from Arendt's theory of loneliness and is worth revising briefly.[181]

Arendt's phenomenology of loneliness is marked by an *absence of agency* (Lucas, 2018). In this sense, loneliness involves a sort of *non-appearance* before others. Lucas proposes that if loneliness is the failure to appear as a self in the world, then it follows that we can conceive of appearance in the world as a kind of agency. Lucas argues that Arendt's remarks on loneliness add an ontological dimension to her conception of political action. In Arendt, there is a condition for political action in a plurality: it is the "elementary confidence" that one will appear in the world in the first place (Arendt, 1976, p. 477).

The world in which the agent appears is defined as what we build between ourselves and hold in common through action. It is made up of laws, institutions, imaginaries and norms (and, crucially, the conversations we are always having about these things). This definition of the world is very much in line with Lucas's concept of ontological agency. The ontological agent exercises her agency by appearing in the world as a unique self. In this line of thought, there is no separation between the ontological and political registers of agency. They both depend on the worldly coexistence of plurality and uniqueness. Both political and ontological agency depend, in other words, on a conception of the singular agent in conversation with a

[1] As mentioned in Chapter 3, this is in reference to Arendt's text *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* which is well known for thinking through the ways in which *political* agency is compromised under totalitarian regimes.

plurality of other agents, each of them also unique. Lucas proposes that the sustained appearance in the world as a self is surely dependent on a number of political factors. However, she also acknowledges that the ontological dimension of agency suggests that no individual, even an individual constituted by relations of power, is reducible to politics.

Arendt's account of structural loneliness gives us a picture of the condition of loneliness at its most extreme. For to Lucas, this allows us to recognize it in daily life. Even in a world with a robust public sphere, loneliness is a possible result of depression, homelessness and social marginalisation, displacement, extreme pain, illness and the inability to overcome past trauma. And wherever the public sphere is impoverished, wherever appearance is compromised by these marginal states, loneliness threatens to spread. Arendt certainly saw loneliness as a ubiquitously imminent threat to plurality, but she also insisted upon beginning as a constant capacity. It is in the capacity to create something new that we keep the world intact (Lucas, 2018). The capacity to begin is here the capacity to create

This takes us to the idea of the *urge to appear in the world before others,* which is directly related to our capacity to produce unique creations (creations that no other could create simply because they are not us) and it is something that comes as a sort of birthright. That is, the public space facilitated by plurality is made up of conversation and connection between distinct but interdependent individual agents. Disclosure of an individual uniqueness in the public sphere, in turn, is the result of what Arendt calls an individual's *whoness.* Whoness is not just difference or otherness; it is the distinction of each human being from every other human being who is, was, or ever will be. This distinction is revealed when humans speak or act, but it is not a product of intention or planned performance. The urge to appear in the world before others is constant: "it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human" (Arendt, 1958, p. 176). Agency here is related with natality and appearance and it is dependent on others. She proposes that thinking about agency as appearance depends upon

thinking about uniqueness as a fact of human being, guaranteed by each human being's birth. Agency is then not the capacity to align action and intention; it is, rather, the constant capacity to appear as a unique self in the world, though the specific actions arising out of this appearance are completely unpredictable.

The means to appear may be different. Lucas proposes that one appears by creating judgements. Now, the salience of this appearance depends on others. The unique self is intersubjectively constructed in a through relationship with others. What we see in Lucas's approach is that the subject that appears in the political discourse is inseparable from the unique subject. This is very much dependent on the idea of a world that is made up of laws and institutions and where the agent who appears is defined as what we build between ourselves and hold in common through action.

The results of this study support the idea of presence connected to agency. However, the features of the world described by the participants did not necessarily highlight the characteristics of the political realm. Rather, the analysis revealed that in solitude there can be a choice to withdraw from the social world when the social world is perceived as imposing preconceived social roles. There certainly is an appearance in the terms described

Expressions like: "I'm here in the here and now I have opportunities to make… integrate as much as possible."; "I'm offering myself out there with other people and, and that kind… dynamic can be harmonious and… be there and make the world a better place… in some way." This is in line with appearing in the world as a unique individual as Lucas would describe. However, the analysis points to presence as more than 'making the world a better place', or, in other words, more than appearing for others.

### 5.4. Presence beyond appearance

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the sisters also talked about having ‘opportunities’, ‘confidence’, ‘being able to do anything’, being an ‘enabler’, ‘empowerment’, and ‘strength’: “all the time I just felt… an empowerment. You know, there was a strength or a power that was way beyond me. But there was a power within me…” These expressions convey the power of agency that the sisters felt at different times in their lives when they achieved something that was appreciated by others or something that was difficult to achieve. The results revealed altruism, mastery, and productivity usually associated with people developing a strong sense of themselves as competent agents which conveys a felt sense of empowerment that includes but, at the same time, extends beyond the results in the world.

Presence seems to include appearing in the social or political realm, but it also seems to extend beyond these realms. This sense of empowerment as well as the sense of inner peace that were associated with presence, were also connected with experiences of ‘having space to breath and to be’. I suggest that we should distinguish presence from appearance as there is more to presence that appearing. Appearing seems to be a consequence of a more primordial sense of being present. Peg Birmingham (2007), for instance, points out that there are two distinct principles of the initiative to appear in front of others: givenness and publicness. Givenness refers to the unchangeable uniqueness of the individual human being. Publicness refers to the appearance of that uniqueness in front of the world. Natality, in Arendt’s terms, implies both the ineradicable nature of whoness and the individual’s capacity for spontaneous action (Lucas, 2018). Therefore, we see a suggestion of uniqueness being before public appearance. Uniqueness can be defined in different terms than those used by Arendt. In the study uniqueness was expressed by sister Berenice:

> And I had a coin or something in my pocket, and I gave it to her. And she looked up at me. Now, my brother was with me, he just passed on, that was fine, I wouldn’t say anything. It’s fine. That was it. We possibly passed them many times

more. But it was just that smile. Was enough. It was God. I can still see her.

As a result of the choice to give a coin to the person on the street, Berenice not only is different from her brother in this action, but she also was able to experience something he is not: she sees the look in the other person's eye and experiences awe.

The analysis also revealed a connection between presence and a sense of physical energy, lightness, and 'life force'. The experience is also described with visual characteristics such as brightness; and with emotion words such as joy and happiness. There is a variation as to what the source of this energy is across the interviews. At times, it is described as *something from the inside* that pulled the participants towards God. At other times, it is described as an *external force* coming from God, the holy spirit, nature, or other people.

As I mentioned, descriptions in relation to body and space when describing presence were predominant: "there's always been something in me that was a pull towards God, and it's always been there, I didn't have to put it on like a coat, it's been inside me." God was related to the opportunity that the *here and now* gives to integrate, to understand, to find meaning, and to be with other people as oneself. Of course, because the study included interviews with religious women, a primary relationship with God was found. But God was also related with fullness of being, and with exploring all possibilities of being. In this sense, detached from the necessity of being defined by other human beings but rather as a condition for sensing oneself and for opening up to different possibilities for relating to them and to everything else that one can come across (natural objects, artificial ones, etc.). The sense of deeper connection felt with both with oneself and with God is shown the following passage from Sister Catherine:

> Now, you know just to be as real as I can possibly be here and now. And that's what I … that's how I find … that's very much my kind of spirituality. And that's how … that's where I find my strength is in prayer. But the prayer … and it's not going to say a big prayer, not at all. I just sit there, be still and know. Always hear: "just be

> still" … and know that I am God. Because it just comes from Him. So that's the spiritual, spiritual side of it. And the, um … the closeness and the power.

We see how spirituality, prayer and God are closely connected to worldly experiences of power, strength and being real in the here and now.

### 5.5 The fragility of presence

Appearance in the social world is fragile. Lucas finds it alarming that there is nothing at all, apart from *our initiative* to appear before others who see us, that guarantees us a place in the world. Such appearance is difficult, she argues: recognition is fragile, and successful communication is rare. "Dread, melancholia, alienation, misunderstanding, apathy, physical pain, and grief. All of these things tempt us to resist the initiative to participate in the common world and to surrender to loneliness. Even for those who participate in the world with ease, who are surrounded by friends, who are involved in ongoing discussions about worldly concern, loneliness is an ever-present threat." (Lucas, 2018, p. 117).

When we depend on being seen by others or there being a world that can provide 'optimal' circumstances, this seems to be utopic thinking. If we depend on appearing before others, it can be alarming to realise that it is not always possible. What I just proposed about there being a more fundamental way of being present can begin to address this concern. As I argued, presence is different from, and more fundamental than, appearance.

So, appearing in the world is not guaranteed. And to this I will add that presence can be as fragile as appearance. In what sense is presence fragile?

That presence is manifestly fragile is a claim defended by Alva Noë (2012). His concept of presence is key for my arguments throughout the thesis. Noë argues that the world shows up for us, but 'it doesn't show up for free'. We achieve access to the world around us through skilful engagement; we acquire and deploy the skills needed to bring the world into focus.

> We spontaneously squint our eyes and shift our head and body position to keep things in view, or to get a better look at things that interest us. In this way we exhibit our sensitivity to the fragility of our access to the world. […] To acknowledge that presence is achieved and that it is achieved in full understanding of its manifest fragility is really to give up the idea that the world shows up as a remote object of contemplation. Perception is a transaction; it is the sharing of a situation with what you perceive. (Noë, 2012, p. 2)

A novelty of this view is that where Heidegger saw a 'withdrawal' of the world, Noë sees a variety of presence. He argues that existential phenomenologists, such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, propose that what is basic in human experience is not our capacity for thoughtful observation or understanding of the world where we find ourselves, but rather, the fact of our attunement without thought. This attunement takes the form of a readiness to act, and of the disappearance both of the need for and also the possibility of looking and finding out how things are. For Heidegger the world is inobtrusive and unthought. The things that are around us are not thematically apprehended for deliberate thinking about them; instead, in circumspection, we find our bearings in regard to them. So instead of *showing up* for us, the world 'withdraws', at least when we are engaged and at home in it. What this means is that, for Heidegger, we live for the most part not in a world of objects and properties. What is 'given' to us is the ""for writing," the "for going in and out," . . . "for sitting." That is, writing, going-in-and-out, sitting, and the like are that wherein we a priori move. What we know when we "know our way around" (Heidegger 1975/1982, 144)" (Noë, 2012).

Noë, argues that readiness-to-hand which is unthought, unmediated, unthematized is in clear contrast to presence. Talk of presence, for Heidegger, is always talk of a kind of thought-mediated intellectual detachment from the world around us. Presence is always the representation of a feature or object in thought or experience, and so it is always correlated with

observation, or contemplation. But, as Noë argues, even if they are withdrawn to the background, the tools that form the body of the athlete's or the craftsperson's engaged living are not absent in that sort of 'dead way'. Rather, they are *there* for the agent, within reach, and for this, they can be taken for granted, and relied on. We can say that the hammer or the view out of the window, are always present, even when they are in an important sense also absent. But they are present in the way of these things, in the ways of that which is acted with and taken for granted. Theirs is a withdrawing, unattended, absent presence, but it is a presence nonetheless. And it is in this sense that, according to Noë, presence is achieved. It does not come for free, he says: we act it out. The point is not to question that there is a meaningful world that is always already there for us. We do not need to always *strive* to bring the world into focus. We do not need to figure out, all by ourselves, what is what and how things are to be used. And in this sense, we are always already in the middle of things. But this is not to say that our attunement to what there is around us, its presence for us, its availability or readiness-to-hand, is not our achievement. In other words, there is place for knowledge and understanding in an account of our experience of the world around us but this does not deny that we also achieve the world's presence.

The idea that Heidegger and some existential phenomenologists defend is that there is a certain merging and flow with the world. This idea that we are merged with the world does not allow them to see that presence can be fragile. Of course, phenomenologists accept that absorption and flow can encounter obstacles. We miss a line or misread a word. But from their perspective, this can only be represented as *breakdown,* as the shattering of the spell, as ejection from the zone. But Noe argues that breakdown of this sort is not breakdown at all; it is one of the shapes that our skillful engagement with what we are doing can take. For instance, when we read it is our ability to keep a grip on the letters and text *without* letting them distract

us that is the crux of our achievement. We read *by* keeping a grip on the letters. And it is our thoughtful understanding and our knowledge that gives us the poise we need to carry on over the rough spots.

The reason why this sense of presence is important is because of the emphasis on the active role that it takes being engaged and present in the world. Noë's emphasis on the presence of the world is enlightening for us here because it reveals the other side of the coin. We are present in the world and, in a sense, the world becomes present for us. That is, by acting in the world and appearing we also bring aspects of the world forth to our perception. And when this happens, our experience of the world is optimized. The fragility here is that doing this implies a level of engagement that may not happen. We saw this in the case of Berenice and her choice of offering a coin that was different from her brother's choice. And my point here is unrelated to 'doing the right thing'. Rather, what it shows is how our unique actions open different possibilities for having further experiences that bring specific aspects of the world forth that are unique to each one of us. The revealing of these aspects is dependent on those actions.

**5.6. Presence is achieved, different ways of being present and the power of withdrawing**

Presence can mean different things. Noë proposes three readings that are relevant to the point I want to make in this chapter. The first is the kind of presence that 'comes for free':

> We don't choose to be born, and we don't choose the conditions of our birth. You don't choose to be born a human being. You don't choose to be born here rather than there, now rather than then, male rather than female, loved rather than unloved, sick rather than healthy, wealthy rather than poor. One day you are here. You are like Gregor Samsa in Kafka's story. You wake up and find that you are present. This much presence comes for free. and not only that, we can't escape it. We are saddled with it. We are animals. We are organic. We ingest, digest, and excrete, we metabolize, we secrete and we dry out. and we live all of that. We experience it. (Noë, 2012, p. 13)

The first sense of presence is a basic existence that comes with being an organism in the world. But we are not merely present as animals; rather, we are unwilling to settle for the presence that comes for free and insist on remaking ourselves as persons and as citizens.

The second sense of presence is achieved. According to Noë, it is that in which I am not only animal, "I am also a father, and a teacher, and a philosopher, and a writer. these modalities of my being were no more *given* to me than my ability to read and write." (Noë, 2012, p. 12) . There is a correspondence between our achieving presence and the world presenting itself to us. "[To the fact that] the world shows up…there corresponds the fact that *we ourselves show up.* The world shows up thanks to our mastery and exercise of skills of access" (Noë, 2012, p. 12). Noë's emphasis is on the action of gaining presence in the world: "We achieve the world by enacting ourselves. Insofar as we achieve access to the world, we also achieve *ourselves*" (Noë, 2012, p. 15).

This achievement depends on my efforts but there is still dependence on others. To Noë I achieve myself not on my own but as a result of a sort of collaborative achievement with others. "Maybe it would be truer to say that my parents and my friends and family and children and colleagues have achieved me for me" (Noë, 2012, p. 17). It is worth bringing Berenice's quote again here as it exemplifies what Noë is saying:

> And there was this young girl sitting in the bridge begging. And I had a coin or something in my pocket, and I gave it to her. And she looked up at me. Now, my brother was with me, he just passed on, that was fine, I wouldn't say anything. It's fine. That was it. We possibly passed them many times more. But it was just that smile. Was enough. It was god. I can still see her. You know that kind of feeling? When you just say thank you, god is… help you to do it. It's not myself it's not me, I don't get proud because I did it, I just get (opens her eyes and mouth expressing awe) I was used to do it. You know?

Here Bernice is mentioning how the smile and the face of the other, the other's acknowledgment of her action is what makes her experience her own sense of worthiness and, in this, her presence. This passage also highlights that what is achieved is not some type of *persona* (a father, a friend, a saint) but rather certain qualities. This is different from what Noë is proposing. We not only achieve being a father with others but being kind or just having the experience of observing the other receiving something we are giving them. This is what Berenice was expressing and hints as a different sense of being present that goes beyond the person in the political realm, as Noë suggests.

Another important point is that we can achieve new ways of being present. We cultivate ourselves, according to Noë, by learning to talk and read and dance and dress and play guitar and do mathematics and physics and philosophy and, in this cultivation, worlds open up that would otherwise be closed off. In this way, we achieve for ourselves new ways of being present. This is a key statement, echoed by the study and important for understanding solitude and the possibilities that it provides. The natural world provides an opportunity to reconnect with other possibilities of being that are not determined by the social other previously established. It can also be that a change from one social environment to another can produce the same effect. It is in the change of environments itself that we allow other possibilities to open for us. It is through the detachment that another space is created. This space leads to openness, freedom, and authenticity of self and to a feeling of a deeper connection.

This is a different sense of being present, which I discovered in the analysis of the interviews and that applies exclusively to solitude. We can see and experience something he is not: the look in the other person's eye and the experience of awe. The sisters often remark that they discovered new ways of experiencing as a consequence of being able to

withdraw in solitude. They express how they reflected on themselves, and felt connected at those times. There circumstances of this discovery were several: “I love shutting the door. Shutting the world out. Just leave me here and let me just be and think and pray and read and…not bother. It was wonderful.”; “Because silence helps you to look at what’s going on in here. (points at her heart) [And that] makes us understand what we are about, really.”

By withdrawing from the demands of society and coming back to the encounter with ourselves (our body, our senses) we gain the possibility of having different types of contact with the world. This second contact is possible after having withdrawn from the world. This is an addition to what Noë proposes. He argues that the world shows up for us and that we cultivate in ourselves the power to bring the world forth. It is our nature to do this and in so doing we show up not merely as the animals we of course are, but as persons capable of enacting the world through our own skilful exploration and self-cultivation (Noë, 2012). To Noë, we are present when we bring the world forth; what I am adding is that in solitude we gain a different state of presence when we withdraw from the world intentionally. There is also power in this withdrawal. We afterwards bring the world forth again and this time a different way of experiencing the world may occur.

This withdrawal is not unnoticed. As mentioned in the previous chapter, a theme that I found in the interviews concerns a kind of *power* that the sisters feel in themselves and that reflects their own personal skills and qualities whose successful deployment they largely attribute to God. This is described as a capacity to enable others, to be empowered in one’s mission, to see what other people cannot and achieve what other people find difficult or impossible. This power is enhanced by solitude and for the sisters, finally realising that they have that power is the result of a long process in which self-reflection plays in important part. Solitude enables them to discover and exercise that

power.

**(2) Solitude allows for a sense of connection with oneself**

As mentioned previously, connections can be established with the social world, with nature, and with god. The connection with God provides the very basis for any other experience or connection and the possibility for making sense of any experience. As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, in the study I found that connections with others were distinguished between connections with the social world on the one hand and with the natural world on the other. As I also discussed previously, in solitude there is a possibility to withdraw from these worlds (it is usually from the social) and there is no perception of absence in this withdrawal. And the natural world provided a possibility to reconnect with other possibilities of being that are not determined by what is previously established. I also mentioned that in this detachment another possibility is created . This space leads freedom, and authenticity.

In the case of the sisters, this authenticity is found by answering a call to respond to God, but also to be oneself. Answering a call is a reciprocal movement. On the one side, the call is a type of experience that it is felt in the body (described as an energy of mutual attraction, of lightness and power) that participants find more difficult to describe than loneliness. Here is where the descriptions in relation to body and space are predominant and we find the expressions I previously mentioned such as: “there’s always been something in me that was a pull towards God, and it’s always been there, I didn’t have to put it on like a coat, it’s been inside me.” On the other side, answering this call is a choice. In Sister Teresa’s words: “some women choose to be single. It is called single vocation.” But this choice is a choice to be in the service of others, to be the most authentic for others. Being for others is embedded in this very choice to be oneself. Accepting this call is “to be able to be open, to be free, to be the person that god has made me. Now, you know just to be as real as I can possibly be here and now”; to

"offer myself out there with other people and, and that kind…dynamic can be harmonious and…be there and make the world a better place… in some way".

As we saw in the previous section, the results of the study indicated that presence was related with having a connection with one's own bodily sensations. The analysis also revealed a connection between presence and a sense of physical energy and 'life force'.

Solitude offers the possibilities for this form of presence as awareness of the connection with one's own bodily sensations. This idea is also supported by Noë, if we consider that organic, somatic field of sensations that forms the ever-present background to our lived achievement of the environment's presence. The tightness in the shoulders or the thrumming in the ears, the aches, tingles, twinges, shivers, vibrations, trembles, chills, tickles, flashes, strains and tensions that are, in a way, never absent. I mean that felt constancy of the earth's gravity, the sun's warmth, the night's chill. I mean the felt stretching of the muscles as we rotate the eyes in their orbits. It is tempting to say of this presence of the body in our lives that it is simply *given.* it comes for free. We don't have to do anything to achieve *it.* It is true that we do not reach out to the body and so that in that sense we do not even *achieve* access to it. Certainly we don't need to acquire conceptual or sensorimotor skills to bring the felt condition of the body itself into awareness. It is there. It is there independently of what we know and what we judge and what we can do. The body and these conditions of being are an animal inheritance. We come to the world with all this. Perhaps the defining feature of the body's sensorial presence is the way it resides (usually) in the background. If we are to hope to bring this pervasive feature of our lives, of ourselves, into focus, then we need actively to withdraw from our habitual engagement with the world around us. We need somehow to let the body itself crowd into the space of our attention and let itself be felt. and this is not easy. Perhaps it is one of the aims of practices such as meditation and yoga to enhance the kind of sense of self that arises out of a withdrawal from our worldly engagements (Noë, 2012). Sister Berenice confirms this:

> The colours of those flowers. Like you look at the flowers right now, if you look at any little flower. Like those daffodils. There's yellow, and another colo[u]r inside, there is another bit inside, there is a green. Just look at them. We don't give ourselves time. Sometimes, it's that thing. You're alone with God. Alone with this creation that we call it. You're alone with this creation. And you are on a different level.
>
> VM: In a way, you become aware that you cannot possibly make that happen, so … you are in company.
>
> SB: And I think today a lot of people are looking for that. They are missing it with all these new gadgets and all this activity and all that's happening. I just wish, they could sit down and just. Even here you could, you know. I was out there and sit down, before I came in. and I thought, how nice and quiet just to sit. And you don't need [anything], not a thing. And you just listen to [the world]. And sometimes in the church when I'm there and there's this big crucifix and I just look up at it and think.

As Noë suggests, we must recognize that we *do* need to achieve access to the body after all. Not by reaching out or using gadgets or concepts, but in a different way. We try to let go of the world to make room for the body. In this passage, the world that we let go is the social world while the natural world becomes a way to connect with one's body. This is also an achievement. This time we achieve a connection with our own senses. We see no contrasts in this experience as we did in loneliness where there were characteristics in the environment that were contrasted with bodily sensations. The environment becomes 'an extension of the body' in this sense, and a way to connect with it.

Presence is fragile even before considering experiences like loneliness. The fragility of access is not only with the world but also with ourselves. Solitude provides the condition for this connection to happen. Moreover, connection with oneself creates a sense of harmony with what one is experiencing and this avoids the disconnections that, as I described, are experienced in loneliness.

We can return to Arendt's insights on this point too. In loneliness, one "loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all" (Arendt, 1976, p. 477). Being a 'conversation partner' seen as a foundation to 'make experiences' is interesting. Lucas interprets this as the "elementary confidence" that one will be seen, that one can be seen. And argues that losing trust in oneself as a thinking partner means losing the ability to be alone in solitude. But there is more here. In her own style what Arendt is expressing is a connection between meaning and experience which is *with others* and *in the world.* "Only because we have common sense, that is only because not one man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth can we trust our immediate sensual experience" (Arendt, 1976, p. 476). She is talking about the ability to experience an objective world based on our sensory experience. Our 'ability to have a conversation with oneself' is the ability to not only have a conversation with other but also with the world. That is, to trust in the objectivity of it, to physically inhabit it and find meaning in it.

Arendt's insights on the need to acknowledge that there are others before we are able to connect with our own experience is inspired in Husserl's reflections on the role of the body and agency. The idea that being-with others is at the very structure of our human experience is something that I discussed in chapter 3. I now turn to this again because it is relevant to look at another face of it that will shed more light into the nature of the connection with oneself experienced in solitude.

### 5.7. The role of the body

Husserl proposes that I have to reach the most primordial dimension of my subjectivity. In this dimension, I find my own perceptions, the ones I can reach via the mobility of my own body. This is the horizon of my own body, which also opens a dimension from which I can have an original experience in person (or in the flesh, as Husserl calls it). It is from this primordiality

that does not make reference to anything that is different from my own body that I can start having access to the other. Husserl proposes that this happens through empathy.

Husserl proposes that the world that human beings have in common is the result of an intersubjective constitution. But in order to understand how this constitution comes to be, the knowledge we have about the objective world needs to be suspended. That is, at the very core of the constitution of this intersubjective world, there is something more basic than our institutions. Husserl is interested in understanding the world we have an immediate experience of in perception. The first concept of world that appears in early writings (e.g. Logical Investigations (1913/1973) and Ideas (1913/1982) responds to Husserl's interest in finding the universal structures present in the formation of our surrounding world. Husserl proposes that every object is surrounded by a horizon of other objects. These other objects have horizons where they appear as well. The object's immediate surrounding is in the foreground and the rest of the surroundings of other objects are in the background. The horizon that contains all the objects (universal horizon) is what, for Husserl, is the world. What is behind this idea of world is the idea of framework or limit where everything can exist but that cannot be fully realizable in itself. This is a very Gestaltic idea of figure and ground, where for all figures to appear there is a need for a background that acts as a framework for these figures to appear against. The world is this background of universal potentiality where any figure is possible. It is the horizon of all the horizons. More specifically, each object has an internal and an external horizon. This is the context of the object in relation to other objects. Each object with their internal and external horizons coincides in the horizon of all possible horizons. The world is the horizon of all horizons. What this means is that it provides framework for all possibilities.

However, this world is not abstract. It has spatial and temporal characteristics and it is always relative to the subject. This means that spatiality is always oriented according to the body (the lived body, more specifically). This lived body establishes the absolute 'here', a

'point zero' for all orientations (up and down, left and right, back and in front). This lived body also establishes the absolute 'now' that organizes all the experiences that happened before (retentions) and anticipates those that will happen after (protentions). Husserl proposes that every single object that is perceived carries a horizon of all other potential perceptions. Objects are placed in space and time horizons. It is the portion of the world that is accessible to us through our senses and that can be amplified in all directions. The world is the horizon of all singular acts. This singular act has a horizon that can then develop with other subsequent acts. The world is the universal horizon that gives a frame for all singular positions.

We perceive objects in space and time. The spatial perspectives of the object depend on the relationship that the object has with the body. The way in which an external object appears depends on our own bodily perspective. The lived body is the body that we can move and that we feel we move through the sensations of movement called *kinestesias.* The etymology of *kinestesia* is useful here: *kinesis* means movement and *aesthesis* means sensation. Our lived body (*leib)* is the only physical body (*korper)* that we can experience though sensations of movement, and that we can move. As argued in Chapter 4, our movement is generated by ourselves, and it is because of this that our lived body manifests itself as an organ of agency. The body is also the cero point orientation. The body is *here* and from here all the rest is experienced as *there*. The lived body structures a system of orientation that places everything else *over there*. According to this orientation point, all other orientations are organised (left, right, above, below, in front, behind). All other objects are in this system of orientation except the lived body, which constitutes the starting point. All the other objects will be placed also in relation to the lived body (these can be closer, further, etc.) Now, the perception of the spatial object depends upon the movements of the lived body. It is according to these movements that we can see different aspects or appearances of the objects.

But there is more: there is a correlation between movements of the body and aspects of the objects. Husserl calls it a relationship of motivation. A sort of "if…then…" If I make certain movements, then certain aspects of the objects will manifest. What happens in extreme cases of confinement is an excellent illustration of how the impossibility of movement affects our whole sensory systems for any experience. According to Husserl, there is a correlation between kinaesthesia and the sense data because each movement is associated with a particular type of sensation. Specific kinaesthesia will bring corresponding sense (or hyletic) data. And according to the sense data, I will see specific aspects or appearances of the objects. In this sense, even when kinaesthesia does not provide the sense data that correspond to the perceived object, they intervene in perception. Therefore, all sense data point to their corresponding kinaesthetic experiences and these experiences are characterized by "I make, I move", and these are ultimately connected to "I can" experiences.

We can only start from our world, a world from which we have an understanding (that is not always explicit). This understanding offers a horizon within which other worlds (with different structures to ours) are accessible as variations of the essential and invariable determinations that belong to the world in general. And this is what makes our body so fundamental. It is a unique centre, a particular perspective from where everything is perceived. More importantly, our perspective is where the 'I can' resides, the most basic part of our agency.

### (3) In solitude there is an interplay between independence and dependence on others

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the relationship with the other cannot be excluded, since it is so fundamental that the very possibility of experiencing an objective world is based on this. And there is a fundamental link between the experience we have of the other and our own

experience. The other is present in his own way and our own presence is mediated by the other's presence. Husserl proposes that the world is neither objective nor subjective (as in constituted by only one subject). The word is the result of a consciousness that constitutes it. This is not an individual consciousness but rather a consciousness that is intersubjectively determined. Each subject has its own *habitualities* (unique ways in which she has experienced life and formed her own experience). This distinguishes them from others and opens a different world from one another. But these subjectivities have 'windows' that will allow them to open to others. Husserl proposes empathy as a way via which we become conscious of the other.

This is how it happens: in the process of remembering we become conscious of a plurality of 'I's, as centres of our own past experiences. When we remember, another 'I' becomes manifest: it is not the 'I' that is remembering but the 'I' that had the experience that I am remembering. In empathy there is consciousness of a plurality of 'I's. But in this case this plurality belongs to different lived experiences and not just my experience. This allows for an intersubjective horizon, a horizon for 'us': a horizon where there are other subjectivities besides mine. Insofar as it will be possible to have a 'superposition' and convergence of other subjectivities, this will result in the constitution of an objective world. This horizon allows us to find objects in the world that go beyond the merely natural. These objects belong to the world of nature in the sense that they exist to us because we have a harmonic and concordant experience of them. But the particularity of these objects is that they also have the character of subjects. That is, they present themselves as subjects who are in front of us (*Gegensubjekte*). These subjects are as in command of their own lived bodies as we are of ours. These are objects have a psycho-physical character. And they must be constituted by us in such a way that we are aware of this subjective condition that this peculiar object (aka human being) has.

**5.8 The role of empathy**

Husserl presents a systematic overview of his ideas on intersubjectivity in books XIII-XV of *Husserliana.* In the Fifth Cartesian Meditation (1913/1988) (paragraphs 42-55) Husserl describes 'the other' as follows: first, it is an object that appears as existent; second, it is a psychophysical object (it is directing its own body); third, this object is also a subject that has an experience of life that is analogous to the one I have; fourth, in her experience this subject has me as an object.

Now, I cannot have an experience of someone else's consciousness. I can only experience my own acts and my own agency. It is not possible to have an immediate perception of the consciousness of another. That is, it is not possible for me to perceive the lived experience of another person in the same way as I can perceive the body of the other person as a material object. I get to perceive the body of the other as a material thing in my mind, and I can perceive the parts that are not visible of any material thing (I know that the possibility is open). But I cannot perceive or have an experience of the other person's lived experience. The lived experience of the other cannot be direct because if this was the case, I would confuse those experiences with mine. Therefore, in order to access another person's experiences ,I have to make different levels of what Husserl calls reduction or epoje. In this reduction, I suspend all knowledge I have of the other, and I suspend all knowledge that we share. In order to do this, I have to reach the most primordial dimension of my subjectivity. In this dimension, I find my own perceptions, the ones I can reach via the mobility of my own body. This is the horizon of my own body, which also opens a dimension from which I can have an original experience in person (or in the flesh, as Husserl calls it). It is from this primordiality that does not make reference to anything that is different from my own body that I can start having access to the other. Husserl proposes that it is through empathy that this access can happen.

For the process of empathy to be realised, there are different levels involved. The most basic levels imply direct contact with the other and these are fundamental for there to be experience of an objective world. In the first level intersubjectivity is funded on instinct (XV Husserliana). It is characterized by instinctive or impulsive intentionality and constitutes the primordial subjectivity. It is our instincts that place us originally in relationship with others. There is an impulsive community. There is a system of impulses at the base of this. Each impulse connects to the next "aspires to get into other impulses". For Merleau-Ponty this is the idea of intercorporeality. It is a relationship between the bodies through which we relate. The intentions of the others are 'absorbed' by us in this in this corporeal or pre-thematic intentionality. In this relationship each intention finds its complement in the corporality and intentionality of the other. The second level corresponds to an intentionality where there are meanings that transcend the dimension of my own body in paragraph 50 of the 5th meditation (Husserl, 1931/1988). I have access to the other through her body. This body is presented to me as a physical body in my primordial level of experience. At this level I perceive physical bodies similar to mine. And this perceived similarity of the physical body of the other with my own physical body is the foundation for the motivation for the experience of the other or empathy. Here the distinction between *leib* and *corper* is important. There is a similarity that I perceive between the movements, gestures and conduct of that body and my own. So, we apprehend the body that is out there as a lived body because of its similarity with our own bodies, in that it moves and alters like mine.

Therefore, I understand the other's lived body based on my own experience of my own body and a correspondence I see between my behaviour and the other person's behaviour. This leads Husserl to propose that the other is an intentional modification of myself. We pay attention to another person's body because we see it as an expression (in the movements of the

face, in the look in her eyes, etc.). Our experience of the other is not an experience that is limited to the body. It is a *spiritual* experience in the sense that it happens through *our understanding of the expression*. The lived body that appears in my field of perception is an expression, it is given as a field of expression, as a system of expressions. The other is present in an 'immediate position' related to the perception of the physical presence rather than a rational position mediated by reasoning. When I see the other, I make an active analogy between her behaviour and mine. This means that I expect the person to behave as I would.

### 5.9. The role of imagination

In solitude the other is not absent for me as it is in loneliness. In the previous section I talked about the movement of empathy as a means by which (Husserl explains) we come to recognise the other as a subject that is fundamental to the existence of our world. I talked about different levels of empathy. The first level implied observing the other's behaviour and supposing she is similar; the second was legitimatizing this supposition based on successive observations of her behaviour. This helped me keep transferring the a*lter ego* sense that I transferred in first place. That is, as we find new expressions of the other that are coherent with the previous ones this confirms that this person is alter ego. The third is supposing there must be something behind that behaviour. And for me to make the step of perceiving this body as having an interior life, Husserl proposes that we need to use our imagination.

Husserl distinguishes imagination from fiction. Imagination is what helps us transport ourselves intuitively 'inside the other person'. This is an intentional move towards the other which gives the sense that the other body has an interior life, just as my own body does. This experience is characterized by an *as if I was there* sense that allows me to anticipate the other person's behaviour. I need to imagine the experiences of the other and evoke what I would experience if I were in her place: "This person would do as I would if I was there." This implies

a modification of myself in the imagination. I build the other as if it were me, but I do that by analogy. The other is neither completely different nor the same. I see the other as an absolute centre of her own meaning-making, just as I am. Simply put, our imagination is therefore used to open ourselves to imagine what it would be like to be in the other person's shoes. And this requires a modification of myself in the imagination.

Empathy also presents different stages related to imagining the *content* of the other's experience: first, I imagine how the world may appear to the other based on her movement and physical position in the world, from her own point of view. Then, I understand the actions of the other as a function of very general needs. For instance, the satisfaction of basic necessities: food, water, shelter and so forth. I can understand why someone may run as a way of expressing her perception of danger. Even if it is someone from a very different culture, I can start from that supposition, and I can enrich my knowledge and make corrections. Once we have a basic level of understanding of the other as a body that has the same command as I have over mine, this apprehension of the physical body of the other as a centre of lived experience is at the base of a further level of empathy. This is the empathy of a psychic dimension indicated by the behaviour. That is, through my observing the gestures and expressions of the other, I make an analogy and posit a psyche that is like mine. Now, supposing the other has a psychic life that involves the following three aspects according to Husserl: 1) a psycho-physic aspect (related to circumstances of the body); 2) an ideo-psychic aspect (related to our own psyche e.g. sharpness, power of conviction, etc.); and 3) an intersubjective aspect related to the intersubjective life (moral, rights, religion). This third level of empathy of the contents of the psychic life puts us in the terrain of empathy of the contents of social and spiritual life. This is the mode of empathy that allows for a cultural humanity. According to Husserl, this third aspect surpasses the region of the psyche and puts us in the dimension of the history and spirit. This level of empathy results in the increasing of our knowing the new and 'the strange'.

Imagination here allows me to put myself in the other person's shoes. It differs from fantasy in the sense that it is not unrestricted: it is 'imposed' or determined by the exteriority of the physical body that we experience. It is motivated by a physical body that is there with her gestures, movements, her expression. This other is out there in a world where I can be experienced as object by her, too. There is a plurality of 'I's and this allows for a first level of community. This level has to do with the constitution of an objective world, as there is a convergence of all the perspectives of the different 'I's. To this first level there follows a second level of constitution of community that happens when a multiplicity of subjects share the same goals or aims, the same convictions and act as a unit. The acts of these subjects of second order act in together with common goals and are sedimented in the forms of *habitualities* that are not individual this time but social and that form subjectivities of second order.

**(4) Solitude allows for an experience of silence in which one has a voice**

I will not explore this too much in this thesis as it was an unexpected discovery that emerged from the analysis of the data. More work needs to be done in order to properly address but it is important that I mention it, since it was also mentioned in opposition to loneliness.

Being in solitude implies being in silence. Silence can be experienced, and it is different from not having a voice. Silence, quietness, lightness, power, satisfaction and energy are all experiences described as experiences of presence. Experiences of silence were presented in opposition to loneliness in that they lead to a deeper sense of connection. Talk of solitude is always connected to requiring a quiet place. Silence in this context is more than the absence of sounds. This is an enlightening excerpt from Sister Bertha:

> But solitude … loneliness ... I don't know. Loneliness … Yes. I used to feel lonely but then I realized, as I've got older, that I valued the silence. It's … we are in the silence and there's more … more there's … you can't be lonely in the silence. And then there's a silence, you know, a heart silence. Not just around the heart but right inside the heart. And you can't be lonely when you're in that silence. You know it's a deeper, deeper, deeper, deeper kind of silence. […]
> … with deeper, deeper, deeper, deeper sense of silence and that's what you find. You know, in the trees and it's … but it's here, we are in it … in the silence. […]
> VM: I'm very interested in this deeper silence. You place it in the heart?
> SA: Yeah. It's out of the head, you see. It's with the heart that one sees rightly. What's significant is invisible to the head or the eye.

As Bertha says, loneliness ended when she started valuing the silence. The sisters describe silence also in relation to stillness, which is another characteristic that is opposite to the restlessness that, as we saw, the sisters attributed to loneliness. Even when more needs to be investigated about the pre-reflective aspects of the experience of silence, it is important to see that Bertha is referring to things we do not immediately perceive with our senses and that are still of value and part of our experiences. When Bertha says silence is something "we are in", this suggests belonging more than detachment. In this sense, the meaning of silence is more than just the opposite of absence. It seems to indicate a sort of presence. Moreover, Bertha talked about different levels of connection and silence leading to a deeper kind of connection as something she experienced when on a silent retreat sharing silence with others. Solitude can be shared.

> Well, the silence is all around us. If we sat here for an hour … We would be fine. And we would be richer at the end. We wouldn't have to talk … There's a lot … If you go on a silent retreat … and I've been on a 30 day retreat. You go on a silent retreat and you are not speaking to anybody. You see people walk around and you're doing communal things, you're eating in the dining room and you're praying in a praying room or you find a quiet space away from everybody … you go out to

> be outside to be alone. And then you're … somehow you know that all these people are doing the same kind of thing and you feel connected to them in a deeper way and we haven't said one word, we don't even know each other. You know, there's that deeper connection.

Silence here is connected to a form of depth of communication. In the case of the sisters, this was related to stillness, prayer and a place where they find strength. But most of them also said it is something that is not easily describable because it is an experience. "And often times, you could be there for half an hour and not actually get into the experience."

It is important to mention silence. Silence is part of the experience of solitude and it was mentioned as being the opposite of loneliness. Part of our appearing in society (in Lucas's terms) or being present (in Noë's terms) seems to involve an exercise of individuating ourselves where our voice is something that matters. The experience of silence in solitude does not mean a loss of one's voice. The very movement of withdrawing can be a meaningful act where a different connection is made possible.

### 5.10. Summary

This chapter offered some philosophical underpinnings of the experience of presence that emerged in the analysis as characteristic of solitude. Frist, it explained that being present has a connection with 'appearing'. We appear when two things happen: we do actions as unique agents in the world, and these actions are acknowledged. In this sense, the world is 'held in common' between agents through their unique actions and creations. Second, I distinguished a more primordial sense of presence that goes beyond appearing. Being present was also related with a sense of deeper connection with oneself that would allow exploration of other possibilities of being. That is, detached from the necessity of being defined by other human beings but rather as a condition for sensing oneself and for opening up to different possibilities

for relating to other beings. In this sense of being present, the connection with one's body has a fundamental role. Presence in this sense, just like appearing, is fragile because recognition in society is not always possible or because we sometimes loose contact with our own bodily experiences. So presence is achieved by an active engagement. There is power in this engagement as well as in the withdrawing and disengagement. By going into nature or sitting down in silence, our bodily sensations come to our attention. In the cultivation of hobbies and skills, worlds open up that would otherwise be closed off. In this way, we achieve for ourselves new ways of being present. Solitude provides the conditions for these experiences to happen. The natural world provides a possibility to reconnect with other possibilities of being that are not determined by the social other previously established. But it can also be that a change from one social environment to another can produce the same effect. It is in the change of environments itself that we allow other possibilities to open for us. It is through the detachment that another space is created. This space leads to openness, freedom, and authenticity of self and to a feeling of a deeper connection. Third, there is a fundamental link between the experience we have of the other and our own experience even when in solitude. Our own presence is mediated by the Other. I understand the other's lived body based on my own experience of my own body and a correspondence between my behaviour and the other person's behaviour. In this sense, the experiences we have in solitude are driven by a need to detach from others while at the same time fundamental for our empathy in all its levels (from the most basic psycho-physic to the level of empathy that allows for cultural humanity that allows for including the new and 'the strange'). This is connected to the fourth claim where I explained the connection between solitude and silence. Fourth, silence is part of the experience of solitude and it was mentioned as being the opposite of loneliness. Different from appearing in society (in Lucas' terms) or being present (in Noë's terms) where the exercise of individuating ourselves implies developing (in one way or another) our voice, the experience

of silence in solitude does not mean a loss of one's voice. The very movement of withdrawing can be a meaningful act where a different connection is made possible. Silence also allows for different levels of connection and silence leading to a deeper kind of connection.

# 6

# Revisiting an Affordance-based Account for Distinguishing Loneliness and Solitude

## 6.1 Abstract

This chapter considers how our possibilities for action are affected by the experiences of loneliness and solitude. I discuss a recent proposal presented by Shaun Gallagher and Bruce Janz (2019). The authors make a distinction between liberating or imprisoning solitude and argue that by thinking of solitude in terms of self-patterns, autonomy, and affordances we can get a richer account of why solitude can be either liberating or imprisoning. Affordances are defined not just in terms of (physical and social) environmental arrangements simpliciter, but in terms of what an agent is capable of doing in that environment (e.g., based on the agent's skill level). The key point of the argument is that practices that involve solitude will result in changes in the set of available affordances. And that this will either increase or decrease the autonomy of the individual and impact on the self. This chapter revises this proposal in the light of the ideas developed in previous chapters.

## 6.2. Introduction

In the view of Gallagher and Janz, there are two types of solitude, resulting from either voluntary or involuntary isolation. The type of solitude that results from involuntary isolation will often involve not only a decrease in autonomy, but also a decrease in the number and qualities of affordances. The limited affordances that remain may not support the possibility of choice, which is an element of autonomy. To them, this is clearly the case in solitary confinement. Alternatively, the type of solitude that is the result of voluntary isolation may also change the field of affordances and it may thereby increase one's autonomy, or at least lead to changes in the self-pattern.

Loneliness, according to these authors, is related to the first type of solitude. That is, loneliness is equated to the boredom, alienation and abandonment that result from involuntary isolation. They propose that there is a range of negative effects involved in these conditions and that an account framed in terms of affordance-based autonomy can address all such effects. They argue that when one is 'cut off' from others involuntarily (e.g., romantic breakup, divorce) one may experience a decrease in social affordances.

It is interesting that they mark a type of affordance as social and this is part of what this chapter addresses. I will also be examining the relationship between loneliness and affordances. Gallagher and Janz argue that loneliness may result from a solitude that is imposed, not by others, but by worldly circumstances, such as changes in economic income (Perlman, Gerson & Spinner 1978), or lack of access to public transportation (Berg et al., 1981; Kivett, 1979; Perlman, Gerson & Spinner, 1978). Diminishing affordances viewed in these terms are exclusively related to objective possibilities of interacting in the world. In this sense it can be tricky to distinguish between loneliness and social isolation. That is, an objective state of separation from the world and from others (be this caused by separation from other people or limiting access to worldly circumstances) is a characteristic of both. Solitude, in these authors' view, is presented in similar terms. The authors do acknowledge that, objectively, there is no necessary difference with respect to social isolation between what they call beneficial and harmful solitude.

My aim in reviewing the position of these authors is not just to make terminological distinctions between loneliness, solitude and social isolation more precise and clearer, but rather to clarify the sense in which our possibilities for action are modified in the experience of loneliness and how the experience of loneliness differs from the experiences of solitude and social isolation. The chapter starts by providing a detailed outline of Gallagher and Janz's

position; this is followed by a discussion about whether and in what sense their affordance-based theory accounts for loneliness; and a revision of the fundamental aspects of an affordance-based account that need to be made so that the account can fully address loneliness.

### 6.3. An autonomy-based perspective on solitude

Gallagher and Janz depart from the idea that solitude can be thought of as a neutral state of existence that is neither good nor bad in and of itself. They claim that we can distinguish between beneficial and harmful solitude, proposing two different approaches to explaining what distinguishes beneficial from harmful solitude.

The first approach is to conceive of the difference between beneficial solitude and harmful solitude as a difference between voluntary and involuntary. They acknowledge that it may be unclear whether someone does or does not want to be alone and thus the issue of an individual's free will or autonomy makes a profound difference to the experience of solitude itself. It is possible that one might benefit from solitude without explicitly wanting to be alone. Yet, the sense of control that one has over this condition can make a big difference. When solitude is enforced or imposed, solitude can lead to intense loneliness, depression or even dissolution of self (as can be seen in solitary confinement).

According to Gallagher and Janz, the alternative approach emphasizes the importance of intersubjectivity. That is, the difference between beneficial and harmful solitude is not exhausted by whether one gets to exercise one's will, but depends on the circumstances of social isolation. On this view, we can understand the bad effects of solitude, not by focusing on whether the individual autonomously chose solitude, but on the circumstances of being socially isolated. This view would take the isolation per se to be making the difference, but the authors dismiss this because, in both cases (beneficial and harmful solitude), there would be isolation.

That is, objectively, there is no difference with respect to social isolation between beneficial and harmful solitude.

Next, they propose that harmful solitude is, intersubjectively, what they call a double issue. One is not only isolated from others; more importantly, one is 'cut off' by the other. This could be due to a rejection by the other, a failure of recognition, etc. Since, according to them, this is involuntary, it is not just the isolation that is doing the work, but the fact that others have caused the isolation over and against what the individual would want. So, we cannot understand the bad effects of solitude by focusing on isolation alone.

*6.3.1 Solitude, self and autonomy*

Gallagher and Janz resort to the individual's autonomous decision or lack of decision as a main characteristic of solitude. The effects of solitude are related to the definition of self and autonomy. Gallagher and Janz argue that even to understand how one's sense of control or agency impacts the good or bad effects of solitude (that is, how such effects relate to autonomy), we need to consider a complex set of circumstances surrounding the self and social situation. More specifically, we need to think of autonomy as relational and of the self as a complex pattern. The authors propose that the self is in some measure socially constituted and autonomy is relational. This is reflected in the pattern-theory of self that they defend.

The *pattern theory of self* (PTS) argues that a self is constituted as a pattern of characteristic factors or aspects, including embodied, experiential, affective, behavioural, intersubjective, psychological/cognitive, narrative, extended and normative factors. According to PTS, selves are individuated as patterns of characteristic features, no one of which is sufficient for the existence of a particular self. The self-pattern is composed of dynamically interrelated components in a pattern or *Gestalt* arrangement (Gallagher 2018; Gallagher & Daly 2008). This means that a change in one factor will lead to modulations in the other factors, and in the pattern as a whole.

The practice of solitary confinement (imposed, involuntary isolation) is an example of an extreme dissolution of the self-pattern (Gallagher 2014). Solitary confinement should not be thought of as a way for the prisoner to reform, as some prison administrators once thought: "The inmate was expected to turn his thoughts inward" – a rehabilitation through isolation with oneself (Smith, 2006, p. 456). Such thinking reflects a traditional concept of self as an isolated individual substance or soul that finds virtue in the practice of introspection. If, in contrast (and as they propose), the self is relational in a way that intrinsically involves social or intersubjective relations, then solitary confinement, by undermining intersubjective relationality, leads to a disruption of the self-pattern. The phenomenology of solitary confinement reveals symptoms that involve serious bodily sensory/motor problems, derealization, and self-dissolution (or depersonalization). The list includes anxiety, fatigue, confusion, paranoia, depression, hallucinations, headaches, insomnia, trembling, anger, apathy, stomach and muscle pains, oversensitivity to stimuli, feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, withdrawal, isolation, rage, anger, and aggression, difficulty in concentrating, dizziness, distortion of the sense of time, severe boredom, and impaired memory (Smith, 2006). High rates of mental illness resulting from solitary confinement have also been documented, starting in the nineteenth century (Smith, 2006). Gallagher and Janz argue that these problems with derealization, and with sensory-motor processes, correlate with depersonalization and the dissolution of the self.

Solitary confinement, of course, may involve extreme circumstances, although it takes different forms in different prisons, so that in some cases the circumstances are less extreme than some religious practices of solitude, or other types of solitude that might serve scientific or academic purpose. However, when the authors make a nuanced discrimination between different types of isolation (e.g. distinguishing between sensory deprivation and solitary

confinement) they realize that that it is not just the isolation (or the isolation alone) that is the decisive factor. They mention that being cut off or rejected may define a specific form of intersubjective deprivation and conclude that isolation *and* intersubjective deprivation may disrupt the self-pattern, and thereby contribute to the negative effects. None of this, however, explains why there could be positive effects of solitude. As we know, these negative effects do not happen in some cases, especially in the kinds of cases that mystics, monks, Buddhists and even some prisoners experienced. It would be necessary here to distinguish between solitary confinement other forms of isolation. The difference between the two is related to the form of deprivation. In confinement, it is forced; for monks and Antarctic researchers, it is a choice. Their proposal is that we can understand how solitude works in its positive and negative effects by considering how it relates to self and autonomy. They argue that the concept of autonomy 'maps across' numerous factors of the self-pattern.

> Consider that bodily and experiential aspects of the self- pattern are closely related to action. Action involves the first-person, pre-reflective, conscious experience that reflects, in proprioception and kinaesthesia, a self/non-self distinction, made manifest in a sense of body- ownership, and a sense of agency for one's actions, combined with affective factors, ranging from bodily affects (e.g., fatigue) to typical emotion patterns. For example, if I am fatigued or hungry, or perhaps sad or depressed, I may not have as much motivation or energy to engage in action – my sense of agency may be of a low degree. (Gallagher & Janz, 2019, p. 167)

For Gallagher and Janz, the sense of agency typically consists of a compounded experience involving not only pre-reflective experiential aspects (especially aspects of embodied motor control) and the experiential sense of achieving a goal, but also reflective (and narrative) processes involved in intention formation, the facilitation or resistance of the physical environments (extended factors), and the constraints introduced by social institutions and others (normative factors) (Gallagher, 2012). Limiting any of these factors also limit

autonomy. Likewise, new possibilities introduced by any of these factors can lead to greater autonomy.

*6.3.2 Autonomy and Affordances*

Gallagher and Janz suggest that one can understand autonomy in terms of physical and social affordances: "Indeed, affordances are simply the flip side of autonomy" (Gallagher & Janz, 2018, p. 169). As I said in the introduction, affordances are defined not just in terms of (physical and social) environmental arrangements simpliciter, but in terms of what an agent is capable of doing in that environment (e.g., based on the agent's skill). In this sense, they are relational, yet they always imply the self-as-agent, or the autonomous self. Gallagher and Janz suggest that we can think of autonomy in terms of the affordances available to a particular situated agent, where that situation is both physical and social. A greater number (i.e., range and temporal proximity) and quality (i.e., salience and affective allure) of affordances roughly correlates with greater autonomy, and directly relates to one's sense of agency.

The authors argue that individuals are typically embedded in social contexts, interacting with others in ways that can enhance or impoverish the control they have over their lives. The examples they use include relationships with domineering or supporting partners that may reduce or increase a person's autonomy. Intersubjective relations, seen in this way, and the normative constraints that come along with those relations, as well as the various extended physical arrangements and affordances of the surrounding world, may limit or enhance our ability to act, and the possibilities that we recognize as actionable.

This is how they explain that autonomy (as conceived in this relational way) is a matter of degree – it can be won or lost, it can be enhanced or reduced by physical, social, economic, cultural factors, including our own narrative practices, and especially our relations with others. As we can see, the enhancement or constraint, in these authors view, comes from the environment. Intersubjective relationships are seen in this way too, that is, intersubjectivity is

part of the person's external environmental conditions and the possibilities that the person recognizes as actionable are directly dependent on such environmental conditions.

For Gallagher and Janz, these different phenomena – solitude, affordances, self-pattern, autonomy – are reciprocally related and organized in a coupled system, so that any change in one will elicit a change in the others, or in the system as a whole. Therefore, practices that involve solitude will result in changes in the affordance space, which will either increase or decrease the autonomy of the individual. Let us expand on what exactly these authors mean by 'affordance space' and its relationship with loneliness.

### 6.4. Loneliness and impoverished fields of affordances

Gallagher and Janz propose that an account framed in terms of affordance-based autonomy can address the range of negative effects involved in different forms of solitude and what they consider related conditions, such as boredom, loneliness, alienation, or abandonment. The argument is as follows.

Practices that involve solitude will result in changes in the set of available affordances, and this may increase or decrease the autonomy of the individual. The solitude that results from involuntary isolation will often involve not only a decrease in autonomy, but also a decrease in the number and qualities of affordances, and a disordering of the self-pattern. They argue that the limited affordances that remain may not support the possibility of choice, which is an element of autonomy. This is the case in solitary confinement. And they propose that the same is the case in social arrangements where one is cut off from others involuntarily (e.g., romantic breakup, divorce) where one may experience a decrease in social affordances.

Loneliness may result from a solitude that is imposed, not by others, but by worldly circumstances and impoverished fields of affordances. For example, researchers on ageing have shown that if a person has no access to public transportation and limited access to an

automobile, these limitations can lead to greater loneliness in old age (Berg et al., 1981; Kivett, 1979; Perlman, Gerson & Spinner 1978). Changes in economic income may also decrease the range and quality of affordances and lead to greater loneliness (Perlman, Gerson & Spinner 1978). Loneliness, then, is directly connected to an impoverished field of affordances that is the result of limiting worldly possibilities. This includes any type of external constraint (being put in prison) or others being the cause of those limitations. However, I am concerned that this is account does not fully explain the experience of loneliness.

Gallagher and Janz's main purpose is to explain solitude in terms of how autonomy is affected. Their argument focuses on how extreme limitations for action have a negative impact on our sense of autonomy and hence our constitution as selves. The authors offer an affordance -based account of autonomy that does not consider the disruptions involved in the perception of affordances. That is, prior to considering how limited affordances affect agency, we need to consider how affordances become limited. Addressing how this happens is particularly important for explaining loneliness because lonely people do not perceive affordances where others might. Moreover, contrary to what Gallagher and Janz propose, the perception of diminished affordances does not depend on there being limiting circumstances in the world. Perceptions of absence can trigger perceptions of impossibility for action that directly affect autonomy. Consequently, beneficial solitude depends on something that the reviewed position has not considered: that is, whether a person *perceives* possibilities for action.

## 6.5. The affordance-based account revisited

### *6.5.1. Intersubjectivity*

In the perspective offered by Gallagher and Janz to explain the difference between what they call beneficial and harmful solitude, they considered two possible readings. The first proposed that the difference between beneficial and harmful is dependent on a person's autonomous

decision or lack of decision; while the second emphasized the importance of intersubjectivity.

> That is, the difference between beneficial and harmful solitude is not about the exercise of one's will, but the circumstances of social isolation…On this view we can understand the bad effects of solitude, not by focusing on the individual's autonomous decision or lack of decision for solitude, but on the objective situation. (Gallagher and Janz, 2018, p. 218)

Intersubjectivity here is affected by objective circumstances of social isolation. They even say that harmful solitude is, intersubjectively, a double issue. What they mean by this is that not only could one be isolated from others, one could be 'cut off by the other' (i.e. one could be rejected the other and/or experience a failure of recognition). We can see this in the examples they choose to provide, which are studies of romantic breakups.

Both men and women who are rejected, compared with those who did the rejecting, experienced more depression, loss of self-esteem, and rumination (Hill, Rubin & Peplau, 1976; Perilloux & Buss, 2008). The fact that the person who initiates the breakup is less distressed is thought to be a matter of the initiator being in control of the event (Fiske & Taylor, 1984). This may be complicated, however, by either partner feeling that they are responsible for the breakup (Gray & Silver, 1990). In addition, however, the circumstance of isolation, or lack of it, plays an important role. The availability of alternative partners complicates the experience of distress and the feeling of being alone: "the availability of an alternative lessens the sense of loss for one partner but exacerbates the sense of loss for the partner who does not perceive alternatives as available" (Sprecher et al., 1998, p. 792). In addition, partners develop shared friends and the loss may be of both partner and these friends. And thus there may be other, smaller losses experienced (e.g. when one gets divorced, one often loses both one's partner and one's in-laws).

But, to what extent can we really be cut off by others? In line with what I have proposed in this thesis, Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world says that we encounter others in the world in a worldly situation. And our way of being together and understanding each other is co-determined in its meaning by the situation at hand. In our daily life of practical concerns we are constantly with others. regardless of whether they are factually present. We are living in a public world and the work we do, the tools we use, the goals we pursue, all refer to others whether they are there or not. "The poorly cultivated field along which I am walking appresents its owner or tenant. The sailboat at anchor appresents someone in particular, the one who takes his trips in it" (Heidegger, 1985, p. 240). So in this very broad and basic sense, the structure of our experience is such that the worldly situation 'prevails' (if I may say) over the social situation. That is, our way of being-with-others in the world and the possibilities for action that perception of the world as shared with others does not necessarily even depend on them being in physical presence.

Of course being 'cut off' has a different connotation. However, as I argued in this thesis, in loneliness there are other ways where intersubjectivity can be affected apart from those when the person is not socially isolated or being actively rejected by others. Disconnection and absence may be experienced when surrounded by others and as a consequence of not being able to appear or be present in the sense that I have described. Maybe a response from Gallagher and Janz would be that this other possibility is contemplated when they refer to 'being cut off' by others. But, intersubjectivity can be affected for circumstances that are not necessarily related to the social aspect of the environment. Therefore possibilities for acting or displaying an essential aspect of the self may be impeded even when others are around and one is not being 'cut off'. For instance, as I have shown in the discrepancies and contradictions that are often experienced in loneliness, people are nor 'cut off' neither isolated.

On the contrary they can experience acute loneliness while they are ‘cheek to jowl’ with other people.

*6.5.2. Affordances and the role of others*

Previous chapters talked about ways in which perceptions of absence manifest in our experience of the world and how these affect the possibilities for action that we perceive. Absences are therefore quite powerful experiences that, on many occasions, attract our attention and have the possibility to modify the entire experience of our world. The absence of Pierre is not experienced by Sartre as unrelated to his positioning in the café. When it is noticed, Sartre is no longer able to have a conversation with his friend; perhaps he had something he wanted to discuss and now he cannot do this. Perhaps the tables available for sitting at the cafe are only available for two or more people (which is the case in many busy cities). So, if Sartre wanted to stay, he could not sit at a table and would have to sit at the bar. Perhaps Sartre is shy and feels uncomfortable when he has to sit alone. Thus, the possibilities for action that would have been available for him if his friend had arrived were no longer there. Absences can affect the affordances that we perceive in this basic sense.

Absence can be experienced when others are around as well. I presented multiple instances throughout the thesis: when Arendt’s sense of humour or kindness is not appreciated due to worldly circumstances; when the sisters felt they were not seen or heard by others for various reasons. The thesis has also shown how others create possibilities for us to act and to experience thus opening fields of possibilities for action. In Chapter 4, for instance, we saw how Sister Margaretta was able to experience a sense of accomplishment and honour when she was able to help a student to learn how to read. This suggests that when the other is absent, it is as if some fundamental part of the environment was also absent. But the role that the other plays in the environment is fundamental to the self in a sense that other elements in the

environment (such as chairs) would not be. Every experience is a co-experience, in the sense that, unlike other objects in the environment, others are other points of attention, other perspectives of the world. This not only opens possibilities for our experiences to be shared and communicated but also for aspects of ourselves to be displayed that would not appear without the presence of others. This is what Catherine's role was while she was listening: she called this act "help[ing] people experience". Noë says: "Maybe it would be truer to say that my parents and my friends and family and children and colleagues have achieved me for me." (Noë, 2012, p. 11) That is, I get to be myself, not on my own, but as a result of a sort of collaborative achievement with others. When for different reasons this communication or sharing is not perceived as a possibility, an absence is perceived and loneliness arises.

In the case of solitude, social affordances are not only determined by the social environment. How so? Solitude involves spending time apart from others. This time spent apart (for instance, in nature) may later enrich not only the physical but also the social affordances (as a consequence of having connected with one's life purpose and coming back to social life with a different perspective); or it may enrich only their physical affordances (like the example I gave in chapter 4 of Susanne Sener in the mountains) and this can have a consequence on the social affordances but in a different way. That is, in the example that Gallagher and Janz gave, social affordances were determined by whether we are around domineering partners. But social affordances these days extend to the possibilities we have to communicate our ideas online. Our writer writes from the freedom she experiences in the mountains and she increases her social affordances by communicating with her readers and colleagues. Even when the possibilities to act could be restricted in the social world. We know that experiencing physical freedom permeates our sense of possibilities for action in the social environment. This was one of the discoveries of the study. By going away from the restrictions of the social world, the participants found that a connection to themselves was opened. In turn, this translated into a

sense of empowerment that then allowed for new possibilities for action when returning to the social world. Moreover, the very movement from one environment to the other that happens in solitude allows individuals to display different and particular aspects of their self thus enhancing the possibilities for being and experiencing.

### *6.5.3. Impoverished fields of affordances: between human interactions and worldly opportunities*

The authors I have reviewed in this thesis relate solitude and loneliness to an impoverished world or, more specifically for this chapter, impoverished field of affordances. In this impoverished world, the opportunities that other subjects create for us are not distinguished from the opportunities that objects in the world create. There is, of course, an overlap between the two, but we could distinguish worldly interactions from human interactions. We have seen that there are differences between the two. I could not feel honoured because I have helped a chair move but I can feel a sense of achievement when I help my nephew take his first steps. The opportunities that objects in the world create for me are different from those that others create for me. Yet in theories about loneliness and solitude, these two are intertwined. In other words, for these theories, the environment is everything: people and places, nature and objects. Perhaps we can make a distinction, because it is in the interplay of these elements that we find clarity for understanding solitude and loneliness better.

The aim of the person who chooses solitude is to create a space between the two dimensions. One does not go from one environment to the other in a split second and find oneself magically taking advantage of new opportunities. Rather, it is the possibility and the achievement of every step in this transitioning that creates this space and increases our sense of autonomy. This explains both the fact that circumstances that could typically be seen as representing an impoverished environment, can create different and multiple types of

possibilities, and the fact that lonely people may not see the same opportunities in environments as others might see. A person in a monastery or a writer in her room may be in a very confined space; however, many opportunities are created for their use of imagination, insight or for establishing a connection with their own internal sensory experiences. A lonely person at a party may feel judged and for this choose to remain in a corner and yet she may or may not see other opportunities were she in a different environment.[191] We must exclude the cases of solitary confinement here There is more. As I said in the previous chapter, a connection with oneself is another essential characteristic of solitude. One feels empowered in this withdrawal. This sense of empowerment comes with both a connection with oneself and a successive reconnection with the worlds where one is now able to find new opportunities. This movement back and forth, or withdrawal and re-engagement reinforces the sense of autonomy and self.

### 6.8 Summary

In this chapter I have reviewed in detail how loneliness, solitude, affordances and autonomy are related. I have analysed Gallagher and Janz's perspective that proposes that any change in one of these phenomena will elicit a change in the others: practices that involve solitude will result in changes in the affordance space, which will either increase or decrease the autonomy of the individual. According to them, loneliness may result from a solitude that is imposed by worldly circumstances and impoverished fields of affordances. I have argued that this perspective accomplished two tasks: it explains how autonomy is fundamental for experiencing what they call beneficial solitude; and it explains how imposed extreme limitations for action (such as solitary confinement) have a negative impact on our sense of

[1] The 'may or may not' here is because there surely is a difference between those who are temporarily lonely and the chronically lonely.

autonomy and our constitution as selves. The authors have offered an affordance-based account of autonomy. However, they have not considered the disruptions involved in the very perception of affordances. Affordances are defined in terms of both physical and social environmental arrangements and on what the agent is capable of. What an agent is capable of is determined by what she *perceives* she is capable of Experiences of absences can be highly disruptive and this can, in consequence, seriously alter the perceptions of possibilities for action.

I have argued that, prior to considering how limited affordances affect our agency, we need to consider how affordances *become* limited. I have argued that how this happens is particularly important for explaining loneliness, because lonely people do not perceive affordances where the non-lonely would. And, contrary to what Gallagher and Janz are proposing, the perception of diminished affordances does not depend on there not being limiting circumstances in the world. Perceptions of absence can trigger perceptions of impossibilities for action which directly affect our autonomy. As a consequence, beneficial solitude would depend on something that the reviewed position as not considered. That is, on perceiving possibilities for action. I have also argued that the opportunities that other subjects offer differ from the opportunities offered by other elements of the environment. Our agency and autonomy are reinforced when we transition between the possibilities that the different environments have to offer. In solitude, it is the act of changing environments that solitude allows, the connection with the self, what increases sense of empowerment and autonomy and, in turn increased opportunities.

# Conclusion

In this thesis I have argued that loneliness is not simply a felt absence of other people, although this feeling is an important part of the experience. Additionally, loneliness — unlike deliberately-chosen solitude, for example — involves disruptions of the self and self-knowledge. This is because social relationships in general and the presence of others provide important collaborative resources and social goods needed to develop both aspects of the self (e.g., a sense of recognition and self-worth; character and personality traits like humour and compassion; forms of emotional expression and shared emotions) and self-knowledge (e.g., an evaluative understanding of how we see ourselves, others, and the world more generally). Moreover, in loneliness the experience of absence results in a disruption of self because our way of being together and understanding each other is co-determined in its meaning by our interactions with others and the situations in which we find ourselves in the world. When our perception of this situation is affected by different instances of absence, this has a direct impact on our own possibilities of being.

In the thesis I offered examples of different types of absences and made emphasis on one specific type. The physical absence of other people is the type of absence experienced in social isolation. But loneliness can be experienced even when around others. And it is the case that this occurs even when around family and friends. I called this experience *absence in presence* to highlight that, even when there is physical proximity with others, what is affected is the lonely person's possibilities to 'appear'. I used the term 'appearing' with a specific meaning. It is what allows the individual to make particular aspects of her situation communicable to others. I brought different examples for illustrating this such as Hannah Arendt appearing as humorous to a group of students or cordial to a person she usually buys

from. When possibilities to appear in this way are thwarted, this instance of absence in presence that leads to loneliness occurs. In a world where humour is not appreciated, this aspect of the self cannot be displayed. A good illustration for this was offered by one participant in my study. The participant mentioned a time when she was grieving the death of her father. She expressed her feeling of extreme loneliness as nobody was capable of seeing her grief because 'everybody was grieving'. In this sense, the participant could not communicate her grief (this grieving being an aspect of herself). I argued that it is aspects of the self that are not fully displayed what provoke the most deeply feelings of loneliness. In short, the painful character of loneliness is that it is felt to be an impediment to fully experiencing and developing the self.

In this thesis the concept of appearing in the world and to others displaying a specific aspect of the self brings light to other important features of loneliness and help us distinguish loneliness from solitude. We appear when the following two things happen: we do actions as unique agents in the world, *and* these actions are acknowledged. So one of the features highlighted here is the role of the environment and the other is the influence of loneliness on our sense of agency.

As for the environment, when a change occurs, be it social or natural, this influences our experiences of loneliness and solitude. In the thesis I introduced an extra lens to what the existent literature focuses on. In Gallagher and Janz's view, practices that involve solitude will result in changes in the set of available affordances and this will either increase or decrease the autonomy of the individual and impact on the self. In their view loneliness may result from a solitude that is imposed by worldly circumstances and impoverished fields of affordances. I have argued that this perspective accomplished two tasks: it explains how autonomy is fundamental for experiencing what they call beneficial solitude; and it explains how imposed extreme limitations for action (such as solitary confinement) have a negative impact on our

sense of autonomy and our constitution as selves. Affordances are defined in terms of both physical and social environmental arrangements and on what the agent is capable of. What an agent is capable of is determined by what she *perceives* she is capable of doing. The experiences of absence that were analysed in this thesis have proven to be highly disruptive even when changes in external circumstances are not clear cut. My focus here rather on change of environments is on how perceptions of possibilities for action can be altered regardless of what we could determine as *limited*. This is important in order to account for why loneliness is so painful. To continue with our example, Arendt may be capable of making people laugh but she may also find herself in an environment where she feels this is not a possibility. This translates into her feeling prevented from displaying the aspect of herself that makes her a funny person. In this thesis I proposed that loneliness involves a perception of *impossibility for action* which directly affects autonomy. I have also showed how the perception of absence alters the perception of possibilities for action that are offered by the environment. As it was exemplified by most cases in the study, a given environment can be perceived by the lonely person as 'abundant' in opportunities while at the same time the person feel impeded to participate. Such was the case of one of the participants who could observe the beauty of the place where she was or the many people she was surrounded by yet not able to engage in this landscape.

This subtlety is important for distinguishing loneliness from solitude. Gallagher and Janz's view was that contrary to loneliness (defined as an experience of aloneness that is not chosen but imposed by worldly circumstances and results in impoverished perceptions of what possibilities the agent has for action), solitude may be seen, instead, as an experience of aloneness that is chosen and results into an enriched perception of what possibilities the agent has for action. I showed how the psychological literature, on its side proposed that the characteristics of the creature who aims to thrive in a given environment will be a factor

contributing to whether the creature will enjoy opportunities or face dangers. And on this view, solitude experiences are not solely determined by the developmental and personal characteristics of the agent. Rather, the *solitude niche* is captured most fully in the interaction of the agent's characteristics with the attributes of a specific solitary setting. In a situation of reduced social stimulation, a person whose characteristics facilitate feelings of comfort and control over their particular surroundings is more likely to find solitude rewarding than a person prone to feel at the mercy of that specific environment. Here examples of famous solitaries who have mastered challenging physical environments abound and I also reviewed how this is also the case in other experiences of solitude that are more mundane. My own contribution to the existent literature was that solitude is characterised by presence, whereas loneliness is characterised by absence. And that this sense of presence allows for different kinds of connections (e.g. with self and with nature) that are experienced as having a more fundamental nature than social connections. I argued that the *change of environments* that happens in solitude allows individuals to display different and particular aspects of their self. And that physical adjustment is required ('*settling in*' according to participants of the study) This not only reinforces their sense of autonomy but also widens their perception of possibilities. This idea was also reinforced by one of the findings of the study: that solitude can contribute to a *sense of empowerment* that enables agents to pursue and achieve the goals they find valuable.

Perhaps a last lesson drawn from the distinction between loneliness and solitude is the idea that presence is achieved by an active engagement. And that there is power in this engagement as well as in the act of withdrawing and disengaging. This is a development and an application of Noe'ʼs idea of active engagement in the world as a way of bringing the world to being. I argued that by going into nature or sitting down in silence, our bodily sensations come to our attention. In the cultivation of hobbies and skills, worlds open up that would otherwise be closed off. In

this way, we achieve for ourselves new ways of being present. Solitude provides the conditions for these experiences to happen. The natural world provides a possibility to reconnect with other possibilities of being that are not determined by the social other previously established. But it can also be that a change from one social environment to another can produce the same effect. It is in the change of environments itself that we allow other possibilities to open for us. That is, it is possible that certain aspects of the self are not yet fully developed (only potentially) and we need to find or create the right environments for them to appear. Sometimes it is through the detachment that another space is created. And this new space leads to openness, freedom, and exploration of different aspects of self that we can then apply to the world and share with others.

Plans for future work include (and are not limited to) the following issues: developing insights from loneliness research to think about interventions; study experiences of loneliness in different contexts); mechanisms of change in the experience of intimacy and nurture at different stages of our lives; the preference for solitude in young people (e.g. phenomenon of *Honjok* in South Korea); to further explore the connections between types of loneliness –intimate, social, collective- and attention; little is known about the physiological correlates but the phenomenology of loneliness is frequently described as having interoceptive components (for example it can be *heart wrenching)* so more on this are is likely to provide more information for how loneliness affects our physical health; relationship between loneliness and touch (this opens possible collaborations with disciplines such as developmental cognitive neuroscience).

***Final Note***

This year has brought a lot of change in our lives. Loneliness, solitude, social isolation and a full spectrum of adjacent new ways of being in the world and of relating to others have become part of our collective experience. The gap between solitude and loneliness has also become important and salient to us all and not just to the marginalised, the sick and the elderly.

For this thesis I had originally undertaken two different studies. The reason why I chose to present the one here is that I had a sense that this study had some elements that would be pertinent for navigating the current situation with some different perspectives. In this concluding part, I would like to offer a brief afterthought.

In the original plan for the study, I planned for the interviews to have two parts. The second part was an optional follow-up to the first in which the participants were asked to bring or to send me something which reflected some aspect of the experiences they had described in their interview. It could be any object, piece of writing, music or art that they thought would be pertinent to share. One of the sisters gave me a book. It was St. Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle.* St. Teresa's story is fascinating. She came from a family with "hidden Jewish roots" (Starr, 2004, p. 4) who had to retreat from the Inquisition of fifteenth-century Spain. Teresa was a convert, a rebel and a saint. But besides the portrait of Teresa that we find in biographies, *Interior Castle* is an insightful guided meditation into discovering a part of ourselves that is not usually frequented.

In the first chapter (or first dwelling) she says:

> I fully understand how important for me it is to do my best to try and impart something useful to you about the inner life. We are always hearing about what a good thing prayer is. And we seekers are obliged to engage in it for so many hours a day…It will be comforting to ponder the celestial palace within ourselves as we explore the path of prayer. So few mortals understand this sacred place, although many pass through it. She must not feel compelled to linger too long in any one place, unless, of course, it is the dwelling of self-knowledge (1577/2004 p. 44)

Teresa talks about the importance of seeking for self-knowledge. This knowing ourselves is not something detached from a knowing that is rooted in our own bodies:

> I am not sure I have explained this well. Self-knowledge is so important that I do not care how high you are raised up to the heavens. I never want you to cease cultivating it. As long as we are on this earth, there is nothing more essential than humility. Enter the room of self-knowledge first, instead of floating off to the other places. This is the path. Who needs wings? Let's make the best possible use of our feet first and learn to know ourselves. (1577/2004 p. 46)

I started my research with questions about what someone is experiencing when they say they are lonely. The research expanded into distinguishing loneliness from solitude. The thesis has aimed to shed light on the complex relationship between experiences of presence and absence and to open a discussion for phenomenologically-informed cross-disciplinary research. Throughout my research, I discovered some unexpected benefits of solitude. There are many different points that distinguish loneliness from solitude. The fact that solitude allows for a possibility for pondering about our own nature is by no means what sums it all up. But I like to think about solitude as the mirror experience for loneliness. In her own way, Teresa resorts to God as a way to discover oneself.

> And yet, it seems to me that we will never know ourselves unless we seek to know god. Glimpsing its greatness, we recognize our own powerlessness; gazing upon its purity, we notice where we are impure. Pondering his humility, we see how far from humble we are. (1577/2004 p. 47)

What is the role of God here to Teresa? Perhaps something similar to what it was to the sisters: a means to get to the realization of our own humanity as well as the idea that there are always possibilities to go beyond where we are, an intentional movement beyond our current state of

consciousness, an invitation to raise above our limitations, perhaps even a motivation for our thriving to be the best version of ourselves, to experience the fullness of our being, for reaching out to see all that is possible, to look beyond what is immediately available and strive to be more.

> What do we gain by this shift in perspective? A couple of things. First, it is clear that white seems much brighter against black and that the black appears much darker against the white…We would do a great disservice if we never endeavour to rise above the mud of our personalized misery. If we are perpetually stuck in our own acre of tribulation, our stream will never flow free from the mire fear and faintheartedness. (1577/2004 p. 47)

I think this serves as a metaphor to express where the pivot point between loneliness and solitude is. Just as our understanding of our limited nature becomes clearer when placed in front of the thought of all that is possible, in loneliness we encounter limit and powerlessness in contrast with the many possibilities that solitude opens up for us. And, in this sense, maybe solitude is serving the same purpose for shedding light into our understanding of loneliness. Perhaps the following words by Edith Stein in *Ways to Stillness* capture the essence of what distinguishes loneliness from solitude as presented in this thesis: *"Each of us is perpetually on the razor's edge: on one side, absolute nothingness; on the other, the fullness of divine life"* (Stein, 1987, p. 12).

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