

LONELINESS, LOVE, AND THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT: In this article, we illuminate the affective phenomenon of loneliness by exploring the question of how it relates to love and other forms of friendship. We reflect in particular on the question of how different forms of loneliness are relevant to human existence. Distinguishing three forms of loneliness, we first introduce two border cases of loneliness: unfelt loneliness in which one's individuality is denied and one therefore *cannot* feel lonely; and existential loneliness in which the possibility of intimacy and existential communication are denied and one therefore *cannot but* feel lonely. We then turn to loneliness that occurs within intimate friendships—even the most intimate ones. In our analysis, we pay attention especially to the role of communication. In order to do so, we repeatedly turn to poetic expressions of loneliness. We argue that loneliness cannot reflect only the absence or partial failure of communication but also the inherent limits of communication. These limits in turn point back to the nature of human existence and love itself.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Loneliness is particularly topical. In the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic involving forced “isolation” and “distancing” practices, it has gained an alarming urgency. But even before this, it was already in the public eye in the last few years, as evidenced by the appointment (in 2018) of the first British Minister for Loneliness, itself understood as a public health crisis. Moreover, loneliness has on a broader scale been claimed to have become epidemic in the past two or three centuries. At the same time, it frequently has been observed that loneliness is characteristic of human existence as such. We are capable of feeling lonely by virtue of core features of human existence, however much this capacity is elicited in particular social conditions, such as, for example, when family members live far apart or when we feel alienated by communication technologies. In this paper, we focus on the latter, the universally or endemically human. We seek to illuminate the affective phenomenon of loneliness by exploring how it relates to human existence, love (especially friendship), and communication. Doing so not only promises to deepen our understanding of loneliness and human existence in general but also is an important precondition for assessing specific historical or contemporary manifestations of loneliness.

Despite its ubiquity and topicality, loneliness has received relatively little attention in contemporary philosophy of emotions. Although loneliness intuitively can be classified as an affective phenomenon, apart from some notable exceptions (Koch 1983; McGraw 1995; Ben-Ze’ev 2000, 470–71; Mijuskovic 2015; Svendsen 2017; Roberts and Krueger 2021) the phenomenon of loneliness has been generally neglected in this field. In addition to the aforementioned works within philosophy of emotions, loneliness occasionally is explored from the perspective of particular thinkers, such as Friedrich Nietzsche (Remhof 2018), Hannah Arendt (Lucas 2019), or Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer (Costache 2013). Also, the ethical or political dimensions of loneliness have attracted interest (Stauffer 2015). Finally, loneliness has received attention from scholars focused on interpreting literary texts (Lewis 2009; Alberti 2019).

Tom Roberts and Joel Krueger argue that loneliness is a painful awareness that some specific goods of friendship are (temporarily or permanently) absent or difficult to obtain for us (Roberts and Krueger 2021). According to this view, loneliness is an undesirable emotional state. This distinguishes it from solitude (Lewis 2009), in which aloneness is not experienced as painful and may even be a valuable condition. Loneliness is based on a desire or need for specific kinds of relationships with other human beings,

particularly a desire or need for intimate friendships. When we lack intimate friendships—friendships that offer us the degree of intimacy that we need or desire—we feel lonely. Loneliness is thus, according to Roberts and Krueger, inextricably linked with (intimate) friendships and (other) loves.

However, loneliness is not necessarily just a painful awareness of the absence of such intimate friendships. First, there are cases of unfelt loneliness in which one's standards of friendship are so low that one does not feel lonely although all one's relationships are superficial. Likewise, there are cases of unfelt loneliness in which people do not feel lonely because they are completely taken up in a project, community, or idea (Jaspers 2011). Cases like these undermine the claim, made by Svendsen (2017, 14), that one cannot be lonely without being aware of it. Second, there are cases in which loneliness takes the form of socially-oriented hopelessness (Roberts and Krueger 2021). It does not reflect the absence of intimate relationships but their apparent impossibility. It is an affective orientation toward the world of others—that is, an existential feeling rather than an emotion (Ratcliffe 2008). Third and finally, loneliness does not only occur when intimate relationships are lacking but also within intimate, even the most intimate, relationships themselves. In this case, loneliness points to infinite epistemic and practical needs: being understood and recognized in one's totality (McGraw 1995).

Although in the literature all these cases are discussed, they are not usually the center of attention, and the relation between the different types of loneliness and (intimate) friendships remains unclear. In this paper, we seek to illuminate each of these three types of loneliness, arguing that the relation between loneliness and intimate friendships is dialectical. In our analysis, we pay attention especially to the role of absent or failed communication and the limits of communication itself. We argue that each of the aforementioned forms of loneliness is characterized by a specific orientation toward communication. This orientation toward communication, in turn, mirrors a specific relationship to two basic features of human existence—our individuality and sociality. Only if we recognize both our essential solitariness (McGraw 1995, 51; Mijuskovic 2015, 90) and the fact that we need others in order to become ourselves (Jaspers 1970, 54)—especially beloved others with whom we engage in existential communication—can we understand and appreciate the phenomenon of loneliness. Although these themes are touched upon briefly by Svendsen as well as Roberts and Krueger, they can be deepened by drawing on existential philosophy as well as poetic expressions and philosophical explorations of the limits of language, which have been largely absent from the conversation.

Rainer Maria Rilke famously describes an ideal of love in which “two lonelinesses” protect and acknowledge one another (2000, 199). In this article, we repeatedly turn to poets—as sources of insight, yes, but also because writing a poem enacts the attempt to reach out of one solitary existence and make a particular state of inwardness available to another. Arguably, a poem constitutes a new “word” whose meaning cannot be differently conveyed than in its particular sequence of words (“the best words in the best order,” as Coleridge said). Not only our reference to poetic forms of expression but also the mode in which this article is written, namely *together*, reflect the content and aspirations of our article itself. It is an endeavor to overcome or modify the limits of philosophical communication and to figure out to what extent it is possible to merge two authorships into one. Accordingly, our reference to poetry as well as our coauthorship are neither contingent nor based on aesthetical preferences only. Rather, they reflect our conviction that the content and mode of our philosophizing, the form of philosophical writing and presentation, are inseparably entangled with each other. It would not have been feasible for either of us to write an article on loneliness, love, and the limits of language *alone*, without the other.

The structure of our article is as follows. In section 2, we outline a preliminary theory of loneliness as an undesirable painful emotional state of mind that reflects the absence of specific kinds of relationships to other human beings that provide us with goods that we desire or need. In section 3, we introduce the phenomena of unfelt and existential loneliness and argue that as “chronical unloneliness” and “chronical loneliness” they constitute two border cases of loneliness. In section 4, we turn to phenomena of loneliness occurring within (intimate) friendships. As we argue, these either reflect a partial failure of communication or the limits of communication itself. In the fifth and final section, we outline the implications of our analysis for our preliminary theory of loneliness and summarize the different orientations toward communication that characterize the forms of loneliness we explore here. We end with a personal note on writing poetic philosophy together as a specific form of existential communication that helps us to be and become ourselves and contributes to the transformation of institutionalized academic philosophy.

2. LONELINESS AND THE PAINFUL ABSENCE OF INTIMATE FRIENDS(HIPS)

Loneliness is commonly construed as a painful emotional awareness of the absence of friends, intimacy, or (intimate) friendships. What does that

mean? According to a widely held view, emotions are evaluative, intentionally directed, affectively felt states of mind. As occurrent affective states, they have a characteristic phenomenal quality (Stocker 1996). At the same time, they are directed toward particular intentional objects (de Sousa 1987; Solomon 1993; Nussbaum 2001). The objects are presented in a certain way. Either the intentional mode or the intentional content of the emotion involves a specific evaluation: this may be called the formal object of the emotion (Roberts 2003; Goldie 2009). Different types of emotions are distinguished in virtue of their formal object. Emotional evaluations reflect how things are going with respect to what we care about. They are based on our concerns; that is, on what matters to us, what we attribute value and importance to (Roberts 1988, 2003; Helm 2001).

Accordingly, loneliness first of all is an affective state of mind, one that in some way or another is *felt* by the lonely subject herself (Koch 1983, 195). This distinguishes loneliness from the affectively neutral state of aloneness but also from objective measures of “loneliness” that, for example, define loneliness as a lack of social support (Svendsen 2017, 18–19). We can be alone yet not lonely, and lonely though not alone; we can lack social support and yet not feel lonely; and, likewise, we can have social support and yet feel lonely nonetheless, as in the phenomenon of the lonely crowd.

Second, as an emotion, loneliness is a concern-based evaluative state of mind. More specifically, loneliness is based on a desire or need for specific kinds of relationships with other human beings, namely (intimate) friendships and (other) loves. It reflects the fact that this desire or need is unfulfilled (Ben-Ze’ev 2000, 470). This may mean a number of different things: that a friend we long to be together with is temporarily absent, that the relationships with the people we spend our time with do not offer us the intimacy we are striving for, or that we lack friends or intimate friends altogether. More specifically, it is these “goods of friendship” whose absence can give rise to loneliness, reaching from pleasure and utility over emotional support and reassurance in times of crisis to the development and expression of certain character traits or our distinctive point of view in general (Roberts and Krueger 2021). As an occurrent emotional state of mind, loneliness is bound to the specific situation we are in. However, as a disposition, it can also be or become a part of our character or personality (Svendsen 2017, 28–30).

Third, in the emotion of loneliness, the absence of friends, intimacy, or (intimate) friendships is experienced as unpleasant or painful (Koch 1983, 196; McGraw 1995, 45). For example, Svendsen refers to a “feeling of discomfort or pain caused by some deficiency in one’s relationships to others,”

and to a sense of “pain or sadness” and “longing” as a “necessary component of loneliness” (2017, 18). This distinguishes loneliness not only from the objective condition of aloneness but also from the subjective condition of solitude in which aloneness is experienced as neutral or even positive. Thoreau, for instance, admits to having felt unhappily lonely just once, “for an hour,” in his two-year experiment in solitary living, and even then was “conscious of a slight insanity” in his mood (1987, 83–85). Likewise, consider how “the bliss of solitude,” as a later line describes it, is characterized in the opening of a famous Wordsworth (1932) poem:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils.

Here, the joyful wanderer walks in his happy solitude as if floating in air, and when chancing to meet with a hillside covered with flowers, he compares them to an angelic heavenly “host.”

Fourth and finally, loneliness also typically is associated with negative effects on our health and well-being and, therefore, depicted as something to be avoided (Costache 2013, 132). It is claimed to be an “undesirable emotional state” (Roberts and Krueger 2021, 190) that has a negative impact on one’s “quality of life” and one’s “physical and mental health” (Svendsen 2017, 8). This effect is especially attributed to “chronic loneliness”: a state in which loneliness is not a transient emotion but an enduring orientation toward the world (Svendsen 2017, 18; Roberts and Krueger 2021). Whereas, on the contrary, its favorably valenced “opposite,” solitude, is often said to contribute to a flourishing life or even to be constitutive of selfhood (Wielgus 2017).

3. AT THE EDGE OF LONELINESS: UNFELT AND EXISTENTIAL LONELINESS

In the previous section, we conceptualized loneliness as a painful emotional awareness of the absence of friends, intimacy, or intimate friendships. Although this claim captures important cases of loneliness, and therefore is helpful to gain an initial understanding of what loneliness as an affective state is, there are other forms of loneliness that it leaves unaddressed—namely,

unfelt loneliness, existential loneliness, and loneliness that occurs within the most intimate friendships themselves. Cases of unfelt loneliness in which one's individuality and selfhood are denied and one therefore *cannot* feel lonely, and cases of existential loneliness in which the possibility of intimacy and existential communication are denied and one therefore *cannot but* feel lonely, build the borders within which more "ordinary" cases of loneliness—loneliness that indicates the lack of intimate friendships or that occurs within the most intimate friendships themselves—occur. In this section, we focus on these two border cases of loneliness, while in the next one we turn to loneliness within (intimate) friendships.

3.1. *Unfelt Loneliness*

When does a person feel *not* lonely? She does not feel lonely when there is no discrepancy between her desires and needs for intimate friendships and her actual relationships to other people. This may be for different reasons. For example, she may be alone, and yet not feel lonely because at the moment in question she does not feel any need for intimacy or because, although currently absent, intimacy does not feel unattainable to her. Alternatively, the person may be in the lucky situation of having intimate friends and actually be together with them, so that in that instant all her needs for intimacy are fulfilled. But it might also be the case that as a reaction to the all too painful feeling of loneliness, she has lowered her standards of friendship so much that even the most superficial friendships meet her low standards of intimacy. In some cases like this, she may be perfectly at peace with her new outlook on the world; she may have "come to terms with a solitary lifestyle" and be "broadly content with her socially isolated situation" (Roberts and Krueger 2021, 199). In others, in which she still shows signs of loneliness although allegedly free of social desires and needs, we may have reasons to doubt her self-description and be inclined to say that she still *is* lonely without feeling lonely. This presumes that the standard of friendship a person has can be assessed as inappropriately low. The inappropriateness of standards of friendship can be explained in two ways. It can be explained by objective factors—there is a degree of intimacy we all need as human beings and that, therefore, is a universal or objective standard—or by subjective factors—the person has lowered her own subjectively appropriate standards of friendship. According to the latter, less controversial view, the person's failure to adapt to her newly adopted standards of friendship may prove that our standards of friendship—even if person-relative—are not simply something free to our choice.

Yet another reason why a person does not *feel* lonely may be that she is completely taken up in a role, community, project, or idea. The reason why she does not feel lonely in this case is to be found in her lack of individuality. This points us to important preconditions of loneliness, namely those of individuality, selfhood, and self-consciousness (Jaspers 1970, 2011). As human beings, we are always both individuals and social beings. For us as individual and social beings, individuality is both a task and a threat (as sociality also is). It is a task because it allows us to become distinct from every other human being. It is a threat because it endangers us with being left all alone in our distinctness, altogether unable to connect to others—like a “monad . . . without windows and doors” (Levinas 2002, 42). This threat makes us flee into a purely social existence, in which we are (seemingly) free of individuality and, therefore, freed from the burden and task of being and becoming a self. We are completely taken up in a role (e.g., being a father), a relationship toward a particular other (e.g., a political leader), a community (e.g., a club or congregation), a project (e.g., becoming rich), or an idea (e.g., the idea of God) (Heidegger 1977, § 27; Jaspers 2011; Tietjen 2021). Because we define our identity so fully in terms of the role, project, or so forth, it seems to become *all* that we are. As allegedly free of individuality, we seemingly neither can be nor feel lonely; we are “chronically unlonely.” Being and feeling lonely thus conflict with our self-conception as purely social beings. Accordingly, this case differs from the previous one in virtue of the fact that we are dealing not with a gradual denial of our own desires and needs for intimate friendships but with a denial of a constitutive condition of loneliness—and, as we will see, of friendship and communication properly speaking—namely, that of our own individuality or personhood.

However, since individuality is a constitutive part of human existence, it strictly speaking cannot be denied. What we lack in such a case is not individuality but *consciousness of* our individuality (Jaspers 2011; Kierkegaard 2013). Accordingly, even if we should not be able to *feel* lonely because feeling so would conflict with our self-conception, we can still *be* lonely. But even the claim that we cannot feel lonely might be too strong. It frequently has been argued that the epistemic and practical, existential and political value of affective states of mind might be based partly on the fact that they can be recalcitrant, that is, that they can occur and endure even if they conflict with our explicitly held beliefs or our self-conception (Jaggar 1989; Döring 2015; Helm 2015; Furtak 2018, 54–74). Above, we suggested that a person who denies her own individuality could not feel lonely because doing so would conflict with her self-conception as a purely social

being. However, her loneliness might be recalcitrant; she might feel lonely although doing so conflicts with her self-conception.

This may be the case even if she is not self-reflexively aware of her own loneliness. Indeed, affective states of mind are primarily forms of pre-reflexive consciousness. They are a form of consciousness *of something*—that is, missing *someone or something*—without necessarily involving self-reflexive consciousness—that is, *being aware of* missing someone or something (Sartre 1948, 50–51; Goldie 2009, 64). Accordingly, while denying our individuality, we cannot only *be* lonely without *feeling* lonely; we can also *feel* lonely without being *self-reflexively aware* of it.

In cases like this, in which our loneliness is recalcitrant and we feel lonely without necessarily being self-reflexively aware of it, our loneliness might bear an epistemic or practical, existential or political value because it calls us out of our self-less existence. At the same time, however, (the fear of) our own loneliness might be what drives us further into this self-denying form of purely social existence (Remhof 2018, 203–4).

3.2. Existential Loneliness

While the “chronically unlonely” form one end of the scale of human loneliness, the “chronically lonely” constitute its other end. They constantly see themselves as confronted with a gap between their desires and needs for intimacy and their relationships to other people and, therefore, *always* feel lonely. Why might this be? Again, different answers are available. For example, a person’s actual relationships may be so impoverished that none of them fulfills her social needs. Or she may be completely socially isolated. But it may also be the case that the chronically lonely one’s desires or needs for intimacy are so great that they never can be met: for some people, “no matter what their social surroundings might be—whether or not they are constantly surrounded by caring and thoughtful friends and family—they still feel lonely. They harbour an expectation of attachment so strong that it can never be realized” (Svendsen 2017, 44). In this case, it is not only that the actual relationships a person has fail to meet her needs, but that the hypothetical ones also do.

Svendsen describes the character trait in question as “dysfunctional” (2017, 44). This suggests that he believes that having social needs so great that they never can be satisfied is a form of pathology. It is at least subjectively and maybe, as he implies, even objectively problematic to be so demanding. The fact that the social needs in question do not only *factually* remain unfulfilled but *never* can be fulfilled indicates that we might be dealing with infinite needs. However, as we will argue in the next section, having great or even infinite social needs does not imply that they

are inappropriate—*even if* they cannot be fulfilled and, therefore, make us inevitably lonely. Moreover, classifying the character trait in question as a form of pathology is in danger of concealing the social constitution, and with it the ethical dimension, of loneliness. It is not necessarily the lonely one's fault to be lonely; their persisting loneliness may also be a reaction to trauma, for example, being tortured or raped. It may reflect “the experience of being abandoned by humanity compounded by the experience of not being heard” (Stauffer 2015, 9). In cases like this, both the experience of being dehumanized and society's failure to listen to the victim's testimony contribute to their feeling of loneliness.

Yet another reason why a person might feel chronically lonely is that she does not only *factually* lack friendships that meet her needs for intimacy, or else have needs so great that they cannot be fulfilled even by the most intimate friendships, but that she denies the *very possibility* of intimate friendships. It is not only a constant but an unbridgeable gap that separates her from other people. Her loneliness is a socially-oriented hopelessness, a state in which all hope for meaningful intimate friendships with others has been lost (Roberts and Krueger 2021). Such loneliness can be characterized better as an “existential feeling” than as an emotion. Emotions are typically taken to be occurrent transient affective states of mind that are bound to the specific situation we are in. Existential feelings, on the contrary, are background attunements that constitute and define spaces of possibilities (Ratcliffe 2008, 41–101). Socially-oriented hopelessness qualifies as an existential feeling because it does not only evaluate our current situation; rather, it is an affective orientation toward the world of others that shapes and infuses our actual relationships with others but also determines our sense of which kinds of (affective) relationships with others are (im-)possible to us (on existential loneliness in depression see Ratcliffe 2015, 201–29). In denying the very possibility of intimate friendships, the existentially lonely deny an important part of the second constitutive element of human existence besides its individuality, namely its sociality. More precisely, they do not deny that our existence *is* essentially social or that we only can *become* a self in interaction with others. On the contrary, they feel that they need others in order to exist and yet are damned to be lonely nonetheless—which is why existential loneliness feels like “being fallen out of existence” (Jaspers 1970, 52, modified translation; Ratcliffe 2010, 609; see Roberts and Krueger 2021, on the contrary, for the claim that chronic loneliness is characterized by a lack of social concerns).

Although existential loneliness is a background attunement toward the world of others that as such concerns our being-in-the-world as a whole, it

nonetheless can be caused or fostered by specific experiences, most importantly the loss or failure of a love. The death of a beloved person may leave us behind all alone, not only confronting us with the irretrievability of the specific other whom we have lost but also with the painful awareness that we never will be able to love and be loved (like this) again (Ratcliffe 2020). The failure of a love through which we have hoped to become ourselves may leave us not only as having failed in this specific relationship but also as incapable or undeserving of love from now on. Also, the experiences of abandonment or dehumanization, or of not being heard, may equally prompt existential loneliness.

One important feature of existential loneliness is its lack of language. Communication is bound to the belief in its very possibility. Even if none of our actual relationships should meet our expectations, in order to give voice to our loneliness, we must at least believe in the possibility of intersubjective understanding. But exactly this belief is lost in existential loneliness. This is why the most appropriate expression of existential loneliness is silence. In its most extreme form, it is a loneliness that cannot be said. The existentially lonely person is completely encapsulated in herself. This self-secluding, self-isolating character of existential loneliness explains why it is so difficult to overcome—or, why it *would* be impossible to overcome if it actually occurred in this idealized form.

However, in reality, we always already find ourselves in a world with others with whom we do communicate. In this world, we can have encounters that transcend our existential loneliness and, therefore, potentially open up new spaces of possibilities. Even if our existential feeling presents itself as ineradicable, it still is subject to possible change. Or, we may doubt the possibility of (intimate) friendships but still make gestures that can be interpreted as signs of hope, as the following complete untitled poem by E. E. Cummings (1994) illustrates:

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If the utterance of a poem can be understood as the lonely self seeking acknowledgment, even love, then the very act of writing poetry is a hopeful gesture—that one’s words may resonate in the solitude of another person, even if this other person is conceived as no particular other. It is striking that this poem is literally unspeakable. Loneliness engulfs a falling leaf, as “loneliness” is separated into two isolated iterations of “I” (“1”), seven lines and three stanza breaks apart, plus a “one” or third I/1, lonesomely located in a line all on its own. The existential condition of loneliness is embodied in the fragmented words, even individual letters, of a quiet literary act. Because it resists being sounded out, the poem is a kind of silent music (Ricks 1998). It is a visible yet inaudible performance of a lonely state, displaying how the term “loneliness” contains, indeed begins with, no fewer than three solitudes. Occupying the border of the sayable and the unsayable, even in its silence it expresses *something*, and thereby encroaches on hopelessness without quite succumbing to it.

The anonymous “one” separates the two individual occurrences of I/1 in “loneliness,” as if an impersonal *they* came between these two (Heidegger 1977, §§ 26, 27). Yet, as the falling leaf twists in a twirling dance—“af / fa”—toward the ground, its falling brings the two individualities alongside one another in the poem’s fifth line. Is the white space between them a dividing line? Or does it signify the necessary and ultimately *not* lamentable truth that (no matter how close or parallel we might be) you are not me and I am not you? The other and I “do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say ‘you’ or ‘we’ is not a plural of the ‘I,’” as each of us is “a particular existent unique and autochthonous” (Levinas 1979, 39). Therefore, the two I/1’s in “loneliness” cannot be summed up. For it is in fact a condition of us loving each other that this must be the case, that we not dissolve the boundary between us. If my mind were able to access yours directly, there would no longer be two of us; I would have annihilated your subjectivity by absorbing you into my own (Husserl 1999, 131). Loneliness is thus fundamental to the human condition (Mijuskovic 1985, 68), the poem concedes, even as it transmits the sense of a longed-for communion between oneself and another.

We return to this claim in the next section. Before we do so, however, we want to address the question of how the two forms of loneliness we introduced in this section relate to friendship and selfhood. While the chronically unlonely, as we have argued, deny their individuality, the existentially lonely deny the possibility of (intimate) communication. The concepts of friendship and love are relational. They denote specific kinds of relationships between (at least) two persons. In denying their individuality,

the chronically unlonely deny one condition of friendship and love, namely that of there being two persons, whereas the existentially lonely deny the possibility of the other one, namely that of (a specific kind of) relationship between these two persons. If it were indeed possible to become completely unified with another being, then loneliness would be dissolved. In this regard, it is true to say that only a person capable of feeling lonely is capable of friendship and (other forms of) love, and the other way around (Svendsen 2017, 72). Individuality, self-consciousness, and selfhood are preconditions of both loneliness and friendship. However, giving up one's individuality is as impossible as living a completely solitary life. Even if we were capable of leading a completely self-sustained life, we still are born and raised by other people. If these others had not been there and had not cared for us, we would not *be*. Nor do we rely on others only at the beginning of life. Both individuality and sociality are constitutive conditions of human existence, and they are not independent but coconstitutive of each other. In this regard, it seems more appropriate to say that *as persons*, that is, as beings who always already are individual and social, we are capable of both friendship and loneliness.

4. LONELINESS WITHIN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS AND LOVE

In the previous section, we introduced the phenomena of unfelt and existential loneliness. Moreover, we pointed out that being chronically unlonely or existentially lonely are idealized states. In reality, even people on one or the other end of the scale of loneliness have had relationships that—at least in some regard—might qualify as friendship or (another form of) love. This points us to an “intermediate” phenomenon of loneliness: loneliness that occurs because the relationships and friendships we have do not fulfill our social desires and needs. As we have pointed out, this may be for different reasons. It might be the case that we lack friends or intimate friends altogether or that our (intimate) friends are absent or unavailable. But it might also be that the relationships with the people we are spending our time with do not offer us the degree of intimacy we desire or need. In the words of one character in a classic existential fairy tale, “it is also lonely among people” (de Saint-Exupéry 1943, 58, modified translation). This is not only the case when we are among strangers. Time spent in the company of classmates, colleagues, friends, close family members, or beloved ones can leave us with an aching sense of intimacy missed or emotional connections left incomplete (Alberti 2019, 49–50). It is these forms of loneliness *within*

intimate friendships and love that we want to explore in this section. As we argue, they reflect either a partial *failure* of communication or the *limits* of communication itself.

4.1. *Loneliness and the Failure of Communication*

Why is it that we sometimes feel lonely among people, even if these people are close or closest to us? In order to answer this question, we need to take a step back and reflect on the question of what distinctive good it is that the most intimate friendships promise us. Intimate friendships answer our epistemic and practical needs to be understood and recognized. Accordingly, the distinctive good the most intimate friendships offer us is “recognizing understanding” or “understanding recognition.” First, they offer us a chance to be understood in who we are, what we care about, and what is distinctive about our point of view (Nussbaum 1993; Delaney 1996; Jollimore 2011, 9–26). However, understanding is not sufficient. Our manipulative power-obsessed colleague strives to understand us, too. Friendships offer us a specific kind of understanding, namely an affirmative one. They promise us not only to be understood but also to be acknowledged in our distinctive value. As a purely neutral or even manipulative understanding is insufficient for intimate friendships, so is recognition that remains blind because it fails to know the other. The understanding recognition that the most intimate friendships offer us pertains to both who we are and who we aspire to be and have the potential to become (Arendt 1978, 104; Furtak 2013; Bagley 2015). Both a friend who sees and acknowledges us as who we are but fails to see and recognize who we might become, and a friend who sees and acknowledges us in our potential but fails to see and recognize who we are, fail to do justice to an important part of our existence (and human existence as such). While the first friend’s perspective is imbalanced toward our past and present—our factual self—the second friend’s perspective is imbalanced toward our future—our potential self. As for those friendships that promise us this understanding recognition of who we are *and* have the potential to become, we call them “love.” Love is a totalizing movement in the sense that it strives to understand and recognize the other in their totality (Nehamas 2007; Jaspers 2011, 197).

This analysis of the ideal of love provides an explanation of why we may feel lonely even within close relationships. We do so when important aspects of ourselves remain unseen or unrecognized by the other. We feel as if we have something in mind that we long to express, but cannot bring to voice. More precisely, in reciprocal forms of love, we strive for *mutual*

understanding and recognition. In cases like this, the other's failure to see and recognize us and our failure to express ourselves to the other may be complemented or even reinforced by our own failure to see and recognize the other and their failure to express themselves. Other forms of love, such as the love of a parent for their child, may primarily aim at seeing and recognizing *the other*. In this case, it may be primarily our failure to understand and recognize the other (our child) that makes us feel lonely. There may be an imbalance toward either understanding or recognition in the relationship, toward our factual or potential self. For example, in a long-lasting relationship, our intimate knowledge of and habituated interaction with the other may occlude our capacity to appreciate their value and foster their distinctive potential for development. In an overly ambitious relationship, by contrast, our ambition for self-improvement may make us incapable of seeing and recognizing the other in the distinctive way they are and have become. We may also feel lonely within close relationships because, although some aspects of both our and the other's actual and potential self are seen and recognized, others remain hidden and unrecognized.

When our desire to be understood and recognized in our totality is frustrated, and our ability to disclose our full uniqueness to our friends is inhibited, we feel lonely to the degree that we do not appear as a self in the world (Arendt 1976, 477; Lucas 2019, 715–16). This partial nonappearance is like an implicit word we have not spoken, something about our identity that we have not explained, and feel that we could not explain, to these others. As a result of this absent recognition, we are isolated even among others who do in some manner know, respect, and care for us. It follows that, when another person senses and elicits our partly unexpressed potential, he or she plays a crucial role in enabling us to be, demonstrating that to actualize oneself is an essentially intersubjective process in which intimate friends are crucial.

Despite its painfulness, loneliness within intimate friendships and social relationships in general may also have a bright side. On the epistemic level, it may be that loneliness, when it results from a perceived failure to express ourselves adequately to our friends, colleagues, or in a larger social context, provides an opportunity to clarify our awareness of what precisely it is that longs to be more completely expressed or realized. In doing so, loneliness provides an opportunity to gain insight into the values we aspire to realize and the person we aspire to be—even if these values are in tension with those held by our friends, colleagues, or society (Becker 1974; Remhof 2018, 199–200). Loneliness therefore may foster not only self-awareness but also social criticism. On the practical level, loneliness can

motivate and enable personal and social transformation (Świeżyński 2016; Remhof 2018). As an alienation from shared values, loneliness can allow a person to define and embrace his or her individual meaning and, if necessary, criticize social norms and values. If loneliness never involved a sharp, painful sense of missed connection then it could not play this motivating role (Moustakas 1972; Alberti 2019, 196). The medium of language thereby is of crucial importance. Language itself can be viewed as a microcosm of the public world at large, and it is for good reason that a friendship of the most intimate type has been described as a kind of *conversation* (Cavell 2004, 49). Our continual attempt to articulate ourselves is essential to rendering more lucid what we need to say. This is why our attempt to appear as a self in the world at large and to our friends in particular crucially involves the attempt to express ourselves in language—and to search for new forms of expression, if our language does not allow us to say what needs to be said.

4.2. *Loneliness and the Limits of Communication*

We do not only feel lonely among strangers and people who are close, yet not “close enough” to us; loneliness also occurs within our closest relationships—within love itself. In this case, loneliness does not reflect a partial failure but the very nature of human relationships, existence, and language as such. Love, as we conceptualized it above, is a totalizing movement. It strives for total understanding and recognition. However, this ideal can never be reached for two interrelated reasons. First, total understanding could only be reached if we became one with the other. However, if unity as the regulative ideal of love indeed were reached, our capacity for love and communication would vanish together with our individuality and our capacity for loneliness (on unity as the regulative ideal of love, see Nozick 2006, 68–86; for a rejection of this, see Rilke 2000, 196–97). Second, total understanding could only be reached if we ceased to become and just *were*. However, if this were the case, we would cease to exist—and, together with our existence, love would stop being in movement and, therefore, stop being love. Love as a relation inherits its ontological status of being an infinite movement from the ontological status of its two relata. Accordingly, even within love as the most intimate form of friendship, our striving to be understood and recognized in our totality and our striving to understand and recognize the other in theirs remain incompletely fulfilled at best.

What does this imply for the feeling of loneliness? It implies, first, that even within the most intimate friendships we remain *capable* of feeling lonely and, most likely, *do* feel lonely from time to time. Second, within loving

relationships, we may even feel lonely more frequently and intensively than outside of them. Our loneliness, in this case, is a form of loneliness *for the specific other*, not, as in the case of existential loneliness, a loneliness for a nonexistent (impossible) other. We desire to become always more transparent to the other and forever to lovingly uncover further aspects of them. The reason why we feel lonely more frequently and intensively, in this case, is not our lack of intimacy. On the contrary, we feel lonely more frequently and intensively *because* only loving relationships disclose to us what it truly would mean *not* to feel—not to *be*—lonely. This is the case because, third, our love is guided by the regulative ideal of total transparency and recognition. Even though it is an infinite movement that necessarily remains unfulfilled in time, it offers us glimpses of transcendence, blissful moments in which we feel whole, secure, one (Jaspers 1970, 65).

It is not just to one another that we cannot become fully transparent and disclosed. Rather, we always remain partly opaque even to ourselves, and our best attempts to give words to our inward experience must run into certain limits. Self-description is always an unfinished work because, first, we exist in process and never as final drafts of ourselves (Landy 2004, 105–25), and, second, the realms of hidden subjectivity are in principle endless for each of us, including what is forgotten, unconscious, or darkly aspired toward. When Rilke enjoins his reader to become capable of walking within oneself for hours on end, he implies that this involves becoming at ease within one's subjectivity with all of its mysteries, for each person to be at home in “the depths of its own world, the acreage of its loneliness” (2000, 191).

It is a well-known theme in Christian spirituality that what might correspond to our nameless longings is an infinite God, in whom our restless hearts can ultimately find rest (see, e.g., Pattison 1989, 386). And a divinity whose love for us is unlimited would seem to be an appropriate candidate for what could alleviate our deepest loneliness in a way that other humans, due to their limitedness, cannot. While we want to remain neutral about the question of whether this indeed is the case, we acknowledge that in being infinite, the needs in question can be characterized as “religious.” Whereas in the case of loneliness that occurs within love we are lonely for the specific other and in religious loneliness we are lonely for an infinite God, there are also cases of loneliness in which it is not clear what we are lonely for. Indeed, some vagueness is inherent to all forms of loneliness whose object is infinite and, hence, cannot be given to us in time—except in blissful moments in which time and eternity touch each other. It might even be argued that some sort of indeterminacy regarding the question of what would fulfill our longing is inherent to *all* forms of loneliness properly

speaking (Koch 1983). This indeterminacy in turn would reflect the open-endedness of human existence as such.

A border case of this condition—a “nameless loneliness”—is described in the opening stanza of the following Emily Dickinson (1960) poem:

The lonesome for they know not What—

The Eastern Exiles—be—

Who strayed beyond the Amber line

Some madder Holiday—

Here, the imagery of boundaries and exile suggests a kind of banishment, whether from Paradise—and, indeed, “Heaven” is mentioned later in the poem—or from someplace we know not where. Yet it is not as though the poet only characterizes the lonesome ones as missing a lost unity that they remember from an earlier state of being. It is important that they *do not know* what they are lonely “for,” that is, what would satiate their yearning *and*, that it feels *as if* there is something that would indeed satisfy it. A place, a person, a God? The loneliness is not transparent enough for us to say. We learn about a longing by finding out what would answer it, and here the affective condition depicted does have intentionality. In this regard, it differs from that expressed in the Cummings poem. While the latter, as we have shown, is on the boundary of hopelessness without quite succumbing to it, the former points beyond itself toward something unknown—but *something* (Koch 1983). It might be going a bit far to claim that the poem’s mood is hopeful or “aspiring” (Lewis 2009, 37), yet nevertheless it is not entirely without hope of fulfillment either. This condition might be described as a loneliness that occurs outside of intimate communication, yet is open to its possibility. It thus differs from socially-oriented hopelessness, in which intimate communication presents itself as impossible. The unnameable thing Dickinson’s lonesome ones sense that they miss, as if nostalgic for another time, may not be available for the lonely to identify, but is not therefore amorphous—it looms at the edge of what is sayable, like a forgotten name. It is something lost, but for this reason susceptible of being retrieved or found. The pang of loneliness has sharp edges, as the lonesome ones presumably discover each time they ask themselves: Is it this, that we are missing? No. Is it that? Again, no. They will know that an interpretation fits when they experience something like the feeling of a lid clicking onto a box, and here the lack of that feeling is called being lonesome for one knows not what.

By making use of metaphors of space and movement, the poem describes the human capacity for “being moved” literally and metaphorically. This capacity is specifically developed in those of us who have infinite desires and needs that by their very nature are nameless. These desires and needs make us leave our home—the place of our childhood, our family, our inherited beliefs, our faith. We do not simply or primarily search for the fulfillment of our desires and needs but also for a “name,” a “place,” or an audience for them, a place where we are allowed to express them (exile), a form in which we are able to utter them (another language), and an audience that understands us (a community). However, there is no such “name,” or “place,” or “community” on Earth—or at least not a specific one. It is everywhere and nowhere, everything and nothing, everyone and no one. Our infinite longing not only moves us “to action.” It also moves us “to affection”—to Heaven, if for an instant it is fulfilled (ecstasy), or down to Earth if it remains forever unfulfilled (desperation). In depicting the condition of being open for the possible fulfillment of our infinite longings without being able to capture what this fulfillment might look like, the poem describes a border case of being lonely for someone or something. In doing so, it abolishes the borders between loneliness (as a longing for meaningful interaction with a person), homesickness (as a longing for a specific place), and nostalgia (as a longing for a lost time).

Rather than depicting infinite needs as a deficiency, the poem invites us to conceive of them as something neutral, or even to appreciate them as an expression of human nature itself. The affective awareness of there being evermore aspects of ourselves asking to be expressed, discovered, and brought into being can be described as “heroic loneliness” (Jaspers 2011, 190). Heroic loneliness is not a specific type of loneliness but rather a specific attitude toward our own loneliness that embraces the infinite task of becoming ourselves in intimate communication with others. It is painful because the other(s) we are in need of in order to become ourselves may be absent or even unknown, as is the case when we are lonesome for we know not what. It is painful because our loneliness may express a failure of intimate communication, as is the case when loneliness occurs within intimate friendships whose partial failure it indicates. Finally, it is painful because it confronts us with the limits of love and language itself, as is the case when loneliness occurs within love itself. However, it simultaneously is auspicious because it opens up the *possibility* of developing a sense of our own individuality, of who we are and aspire to be. Moreover, it involves a sense of the *infinite task* of becoming a self in conversation with others. Finally, it may express our *progress* in becoming a self in conversation with beloved others.

Just as Wordsworth describes the “bliss of solitude,” there is also a bliss of loneliness—although a painful one.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the previous two sections, we introduced three forms of loneliness: unfelt loneliness, existential loneliness, and loneliness within intimate relationships and loves. These forms of loneliness invite us to reconsider our initial conception of loneliness according to which loneliness is an undesirable affective state of mind that consists of the painful awareness of the absence of certain goods of friendship. First, the phenomenon of unfelt loneliness necessitated a specification of the claim that we are necessarily aware of our own loneliness. Although loneliness is a subjective rather than an objective condition, we still can *be* lonely without *feeling* lonely, and *feel* lonely without being *self-reflexively aware* of our own loneliness. Second, the phenomenon of existential loneliness invited a reconsideration of the claim that loneliness is an emotion that, as such, is bound to the specific situation we are in and reflects the *factual* absence or lack of (intimate) friends and friendships. Loneliness can also be an existential feeling that reflects the perceived *impossibility* of (intimate) friendships. Third, loneliness that occurs within the most intimate friendships points us to the fact that loneliness does not necessarily indicate the absence of intimacy. It can also point us to the limits of understanding and recognition themselves. These limits, in turn, are not contingent but mirror the nature of human relationships and existence. Fourth and finally, despite its painfulness, loneliness is not necessarily undesirable. It can help us to develop a sense of our own unique existence and, as such, has a critical and emancipatory potential. It can involve a sense of the infinite task of becoming a self in conversation with others, reflect our progress in doing so, and motivate self-disclosure, self-transformation, and social transformation.

Loneliness and friendship thereby relate dialectically to each other. When we feel least lonely because we are completely taken up in another being, we are farthest away from being recognized in our distinctive individuality—and, in this regard, most lonely. We deny our individuality and along with it the possibility of (intimate) communication. When we feel chronically lonely because intimate friendships present themselves as impossible (to us), in recognizing our individuality as a basic condition of human existence we make an important step toward overcoming our loneliness. However, we fail to realize the possibility of intimate communication. Therefore, we remain lonely, and yet are incapable of the most profound form of

loneliness. When we are lonely for we know not what, we recognize both our individuality and the possibility of intimate communication. We have a vague sense that our longings might be fulfilled, yet we fail to venture into intimate communication. When, finally, we feel most lonely—lonely for a specific other whom we love but with whom we cannot become one—we are closest to the fulfillment of our infinite social desires and needs and, in this regard, least lonely.

Each of the forms of loneliness we discussed is characterized by a specific orientation to communicating. In denying individuality, unfelt loneliness makes real communication impossible. It is most adequately expressed in the murmur of a crowd. Existential loneliness denies the very possibility of (meaningful, intimate) communication. Its most adequate expression is silence—or, as we have shown, a poem that cannot be spoken, yet in expressing something still remains a sign of hope. Loneliness that occurs within intimate relationships can indicate a failure of communication but also, in the case of love, reflect the limits of communication and language as such. Finally, rather than expressing the failure of communication *in a specific relationship* or the limits of communication *as such*, loneliness can also reflect the limits and defects of those forms of communication our socio-political environment offers us. This explains the critical and emancipatory potential of loneliness that, among other things, expresses itself in the search for *new* forms of communication.

Philosophizing and writing philosophy together, being guided by the ideal of merging two authorships into one, can be understood as a practical attempt to figure out whether and to what extent it is possible to overcome a specific form of loneliness—the loneliness of philosophical thinking. Both loneliness (or solitude) and communication are constitutive elements of the practice of philosophy itself. We develop our thoughts in conversation with others: we read their works, receive their comments, and engage with them in discussion. More fundamentally, we become philosophers only in conversation with others—teachers, mentors, colleagues, friends, students, adversaries, inspiring and deterrent examples—and becoming a philosopher, developing one's own distinct philosophical voice, is a process that continues as long as we engage in philosophy.

At the same time, philosophizing is an essentially solitary practice. Most of the time, we present and write our papers and books alone. This can in part be explained by the fact that philosophy is essentially about developing a personal voice (Cavell 2004, 52). Coauthorship in philosophy is far less common than in other academic disciplines. In coauthored articles, often, different sections have different “primary” authors who wrote the first draft

which then got revised by the coauthor(s). This model seems to be based on the idea that each of us brings a different expertise, or at least a different interest, into our collaboration. Our article is based on a different model of collaboration—one that takes seriously the idea that philosophy is about developing a personal voice. As there are different goods of friendship—reaching from pleasure and utility over emotional support and reassurance in times of crisis to the development and expression of certain character traits or our distinctive point of view in general—there are different goods of philosophical “friendships.” By exemplifying a form of collaboration that is not motivated by the utility of bringing together different experts but by the existential aspiration to develop a voice *together*—and the aspiration of each of us, in doing so, to transform our individual philosophical voice—our article seeks to exemplify the idea that philosophy is not only about developing theories but also about coming into being together. In its idealized form, the success of such an endeavor would result in the birth of a new author. In this world, it may most adequately be captured by Rilke’s image of “two lonelinesses that meet, protect, and greet each other” (2000, 199, modified translation).¹

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