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*George Monbiot and Philippa Perry argue that the Age of Loneliness is killing us.*

- 1 What do we call this age? It is not the information age: the collapse of popular education movements left a void filled by marketing and conspiracy theories. Like the stone age, iron age and space age, the digital age says plenty about our artefacts but little about society. The anthropocene, in which humans exert a major impact on the biosphere, fails to distinguish this century from the previous twenty. What clear social change marks out our time from those that precede it? To me, it is obvious. This is the Age of Loneliness. 5
- 2 When Thomas Hobbes claimed that in the state of nature, before authority arose to keep us in check, we were engaged in a war “of every man against every man”, he could not have been more wrong. We were social creatures from the start, mammalian bees, who depended entirely on each other. The hominins of east Africa could not have survived one night alone. We are shaped, to a greater extent than almost any other species, by contact with others. The age we are entering, in which we exist apart, is unlike any that has gone before. 10
- 3 Recently, we read that loneliness has become an epidemic among young adults. Now we learn that it is just as great an affliction of older people. A study by Independent Age shows that severe loneliness in England blights the lives of 700,000 men and 1.1 million women over 50, and is rising with astonishing speed. Social isolation is as potent a cause of early death as smoking 15 cigarettes a day; loneliness, research suggests, is twice as deadly as obesity. Psychological and physical ailments become more prevalent when connections are cut. We cannot cope alone. 15
- 4 Today, people travel by car instead of buses and use YouTube rather than the cinema. However, these shifts alone fail to explain the speed of our social collapse. These structural changes have been accompanied by a life-denying ideology, which enforces and celebrates our social isolation. The war of every man against every man – competition and individualism, in other words – is the religion of our time, justified by a mythology of lone rangers, sole traders, self-starters, self-made men and women, going it alone. For the most social of creatures, who cannot prosper without love, there is no such thing as society, only heroic individualism. What counts is to win. The rest is collateral damage. 20 25
- 5 British children no longer aspire to be train drivers or nurses – more than a fifth say they “just want to be rich”: wealth and fame are the sole ambitions of 40% of those surveyed. A government study in June revealed that Britain is the loneliness capital of Europe. We are less likely than other Europeans to have close friends or to know our neighbours. Who can be surprised, when everywhere we are urged to fight like stray dogs over a dustbin? We have even changed our language to reflect this. Our most cutting insult is “loser”. We no longer talk about people. Now we call them individuals. So pervasive has this alienating, atomising term become that even the charities fighting loneliness use it to describe the bipedal entities formerly known as human beings. 30 35
- 6 One of the tragic outcomes of loneliness is that people turn to their televisions for consolation: two-fifths of older people report that the one-eyed god is their principal company. This self-medication aggravates the disease. Research by economists at the University of Milan suggests that television helps to drive competitive aspiration. It strongly reinforces the income-happiness paradox: the fact that, as national incomes rise, happiness does not rise with them. Aspiration, which increases with income, ensures that the point of arrival, of sustained satisfaction, retreats before us. You have only to think of the generalised obsession with fame and wealth, the pervasive sense, in watching it, that life is somewhere other than where you are, to see why this might be. 40

- 7 Lonely people are nearly twice as likely to die prematurely as those who do not suffer feelings of isolation. Being lonely it seems, is a lot more worrying for your health than obesity. Its dramatic consequences on health is more pressing for the elderly. In a US report, the effect of satisfying relationships on the elderly was measured and the report concluded that the lonely elderly was adversely affected in developing their resilience and their ability to bounce back after adversity. 45
- 8 Not surprisingly, there is no corresponding good news for those less well connected to other people. Feeling isolated from others can disrupt sleep, raise blood pressure, lower immunity, increase depression, lower overall subjective well-being and increase the stress hormone cortisol. The Lonely Society, in its 2010 report commissioned by The Mental Health Foundation, cited a link between our "individualistic society" and the increase in common mental health disorders in the last 50 years. It also drew on research showing that mental health problems occur more frequently in unequal societies where lonely people are often left behind. By squandering "social capital" in the individualistic pursuit of greater wealth, or treating social networks as incidental, are we neglecting a part of life that makes us happy and keeps us healthy for longer? 50  
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- 9 Loneliness is often the core feeling that gives rise to mood swings. Lonely people frequently feel that they are disliked, are often self-obsessed and lack empathy with others. They fear rejection and keep themselves at a distance, which feeds the loneliness. People who are lonely often think that everyone else is doing OK while they are not. They think they are the only ones carrying a burden. Clients talk about putting their "game face" on rather than sharing truthfully about themselves and it can be difficult to know when it is appropriate to make the move from the former to the latter. 60  
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- 10 So what is the point? What do we gain from this war of all against all? Competition drives growth, but growth no longer makes us wealthier. It is noted that while the income of company directors has risen by more than a fifth, wages for the workforce as a whole have fallen in real terms over the past year. Even if competition did make us richer, it would make us no happier, as the satisfaction derived from a rise in income would be undermined by the aspirational impacts of competition. Even the rich are not happy. A survey by Boston College of people with an average net worth of \$78m found that they too were assailed by anxiety, dissatisfaction and loneliness. Many of them reported feeling financially insecure: to reach safe ground, they believed, they would need, on average, about 25% more money. 70  
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- 11 For this, we have ripped the natural world apart, degraded our conditions of life, surrendered our freedoms and prospects of contentment to a compulsive, atomising, joyless hedonism, in which, having consumed all else, we start to prey upon ourselves. For this, we have destroyed the essence of humanity: our connectedness. Yes, there are palliatives, clever and delightful schemes like Men in Sheds and Walking Football developed by charities for isolated older people. But if we are to break this cycle and come together once more, we must confront the world-eating, flesh-eating system into which we have been forced. 80
- 12 Hobbes's pre-social condition was a myth. But we are entering a post-social condition our ancestors would have believed impossible. Our lives are becoming nasty, brutish and long.