

Book Review

Feeling Lonesome: The Philosophy and Psychology of Loneliness **By Ben Lazare Mijuscovic**

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In his recent work *Feeling Lonesome: The Philosophy and Psychology of Loneliness*, Ben Lazare Mijuscovic explores the nature of loneliness, its origins, manifestations, and possible alleviations. Building on decades of scholarly research, the author challenges the dominant behaviorist paradigm and reductionist therapy by placing the problem of loneliness within the dynamic experiences of the mind. Loneliness is presented as innate, universal, and accounted for only by the existence of a self-conscious reflexive entity. Early on in the book, Mijuscovic situates himself as adhering to a form of rational idealist dualism and contends that it is entirely plausible that matter can produce immaterial thoughts (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. xiii). This notion is used to build the author's theoretical framework, which incorporates self-consciousness, reflexivity, and intentionality into a cognitive motivational theory of *a priori* loneliness (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 1). In order to develop his position, Mijuscovic relies heavily on Descartes, Husserl, Schopenhauer, and many others, consistently showing his depth of knowledge within multiple fields and challenging the reader to analyze a variety of psycho-philosophical positions. These positions are discussed with the goal of contesting the empirical, materialist, and behaviorist schools, which posit the unpredictable and temporal bio-chemical causation of loneliness. By presenting opposing schools of thought, the author hopes to display not only the philosophical weaknesses of each position, but their fundamentally flawed methods of alleviating the problem of loneliness.

In Chapter 1, "Historical and Conceptual Overview" (Mijuscovic,

2015, pp. 1-16), the author develops his theory of loneliness as an innate experience generated by a reflexive self, a self which has the ability to look both externally and internally. This ability creates a sense of “I” and actively processes sensations and desires which lead to an awareness of one’s separation from other spatial objects and sentient beings. This awareness of self, separation, and one’s isolation comes early on in infancy. As a result, Mijuscovic argues that loneliness is derived primarily from self-consciousness, not environmental or social conditions. If loneliness is innate, then it is also inevitable. The concluding sections of the chapter are spent addressing the philosophical positions of: *materialism*, all is reducible to matter plus motion; *idealism*, all that exists is mental, mind-dependent, or spiritual; *dualism*, two substances of mind and matter; *empiricism*, all ideas derived from precedent sensations or the mind as a tabula rasa; and *rationalism*, some ideas exist which are actively generated from within the mind’s own resources. These schools of thought are presented as addressing the question: can senseless matter think? By the end of the chapter, the author has concluded that materialism, empiricism, and behaviorism are inadequate to address the problem of the root of loneliness because they are unable to account for the reality of the self, reflexivity, or intentionality. Instead, these traditions focus on alleviating the problems of present symptoms, often reducing them to the status of disorder or neuro-chemical imbalances. In contrast, the author looks favorably on insight therapy, which presumes the existence of a self, and attempts to alleviate problems through investigating the hidden, unconscious, or irrational features of the mind (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 12).

The following two chapters, “Philosophical Roots: Self-Consciousness/Reflexivity” (Mijuscovic, 2015, pp. 17-34) and “Philosophical Roots: Intentionality/Transcendence” (Mijuscovic, 2015, pp. 35-74), both serve as theoretical foundations for the author’s establishment of a “self” capable of reflexive and intentional activity. Sensations are presented as unable to speak for themselves or establish meaning; they are passive (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 50). Instead, meaning is actively created by the mind, which entails the existence of a “self”. Indeed, the author notes that loneliness without the existence of a “self” is paradoxical. There cannot be an unattached loneliness; an active subject must be present to experience it (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 59). The author builds on his argument by incorporating Kant’s spontaneity notion, suggesting that the self is capable of creative impulses which move beyond the mechanical or even the rational and into the imaginative. Mijuscovic also brings loneliness within a historical context, as an experience observable within the literature of our earliest civilizations, exemplified by *The Epic of*

Gilgamesh, the dialogues of Plato, the Old Testament, etc. The purpose of this context is to counter contemporary Marxist notions that loneliness is essentially a byproduct of economic alienation resulting from the industrial revolution, the rise of the bourgeoisie, and/or capitalism. However, the author is quick to recognize Marx and Engel's idea of man alienated from nature, property, and his fellow man as exacerbating an already innate problem (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 18). Relying on mythology, Freud, St. Augustine, and others, Mijuscovic takes the reader down a brief history of thought on loneliness from the early Greeks to the Renaissance. While discussing the Middle Ages, the author analyzes the nature of loneliness within the Judeo-Christian traditions, where Hell is seen fundamentally as isolation from God (the ultimate state of loneliness). This theme of separation from the divine is crucial to nearly all religious traditions. In the beginning, mankind was connected to the divine and in some way has either severed, separated, or forgotten that connection. The function of religion then in relation to loneliness becomes how to restore that relationship in order to assure a source of constant love and connection (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 25).

In Chapter 4, "Loneliness and Phenomenology" (Mijuscovic, 2015, pp. 75-102), the author uses Husserl's phenomenology as a foundation for establishing a substantial ego, intentionality as it relates to an isolated self, and intentionality/reflexivity as being necessary for understanding loneliness. Both reflexivity and intentionality are presented as having their origins in the activities of consciousness. These activities are solitary endeavors, suggesting that the experience of the ego is at its root alone (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 82). Because of the solitary nature of consciousness, Mijuscovic suggests that therapeutic measures for alleviating loneliness may and indeed should be self-administered. Citing Freud's self-experimentation as an example, self-therapy would likely be a lifelong process, given the innate nature of loneliness. However, the process would be well worth the time considering the connection between loneliness and depression, jealousy, anxiety, and other states of psychological pain which can produce both internal and external destructive actions. The ramifications of loneliness are further explored by Mijuscovic in Chapter 5, "Psychological Roots of Loneliness" (Mijuscovic, 2015, pp. 103-128), where the author moves beyond philosophical theory and more deeply into psychological development. Arguably one of the most interesting chapters of the book, Mijuscovic leaves the reader with a sense of urgency in discovering the nature of loneliness and how to address it. The chapter is opened by discussing Freud's notion of the "oceanic," the feeling of connection, oneness, and totality with all immediate surroundings experienced by a new born.

This feeling eventually fades as individuals begin to realize their own separation through reflexive self-consciousness, producing a crisis of isolation within the psyche. As they grow older, they attempt to resolve this crisis with sex, drugs, fantasy, religion, intimacy, etc. When these attempts fail to establish a connection, loneliness often manifests itself under the guise of anger and depression. Anger and depression lead to a state of regression, a retreat to “the sanctuary of the womb or even more symbolically toward death through extended periods of sleep” (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 106). Mijuscovic argues that this type of anger is particularly self-debasing, leading to the development of personality disorders such as narcissistic, antisocial, avoidant, obsessive, compulsive, etc. In addition, citing early 20th century Germany as an example, the author posits that loneliness in connection with anger often produces political or religious fanaticism (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 107). Fear of isolation creates resentment. This is a particularly relevant discussion given the complex nature of globalization in the 21st century. As the flow of ideas, people, and products intensifies, many individuals and groups fear a loss of self economically, culturally, physically, and psychologically; leading to outbursts of anger in the form of socio-political movements. Mijuscovic demonstrates that this fear of isolation is not unfounded as isolated segments of the population such as the widowed, divorced, neglected, abused, etc. are at a higher risk for health problems. This can be a particularly frightening prospect in a country such as the U.S., where individualism and competition are stressed above collective gain, perhaps contributing to the disproportionately large number of Americans on anti-depressant and anxiety medication.

In Chapter 6, “Loneliness and Language” (Mijuscovic, 2015, pp. 129-148), the author investigates the relationship between language, consciousness, and loneliness by comparing and contrasting coherence theory with the correspondence principle. Coherence theory relies on the notion that truth is dynamic and composed of internal relations, whereas the correspondence principle suggests that a proposition is only true if it corresponds to an external and *observable* phenomenon. As a demonstration, Mijuscovic uses the question, what would it be like if God did not exist? For the empiricists relying on the correspondence principle, if one cannot demonstrate a difference in observable surroundings, then “God” is a meaningless unverifiable concept. However, Mijuscovic argues that such a reductionist interpretation of language is misleading, in that it “risks losing the nuances and ambiguities, on the one hand, and the depth and complexity of emotions on the other” (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 132). This is a particularly crucial point for the study of loneliness, where language is often vague and externally unverifiable. Mijuscovic is again contesting reductionist behaviorism here, instead

suggesting that loneliness is a complex phenomenon which incorporates a web of universal meanings and relations within the mind and cannot simply be reduced to physiological mechanisms. Language and classification systems are often crude representations of the experiences of life—especially those of consciousness. It is because of this inability of language to capture true meaning that we often rely on symbolic or artistic expression to convey the essence of an emotion or experience. Mijuscovic uses a painting by Seurat as an example (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 135), suggesting that one could very well indeed describe it in terms of angles, colors, perspective, brush stroke style, points of colored dots (i.e. in reductionist terms), but to do so would entirely miss the *meaning* of the painting, which is beyond quantification or measurement.

If loneliness is not reducible to physiological mechanisms, then it must follow that there is no vaccination or cure; “it should not be treated like a broken arm” (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 136). Indeed, while loneliness is a universal experience, it is not experienced in a universal way. Instead, loneliness is a private subjective state which must be approached individually by incorporating a person’s life experiences. These experiences are fundamental for understanding the complexities of loneliness. As such, Mijuscovic concludes the chapter by criticizing the DSM (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders*) for its failure to incorporate etiological considerations, as well as its reductionist presentation of loneliness as statistically or quantifiably measurable and therefore treatable as such. However, because of time and economic convenience, cognitive-behavioral therapy (which relies on the DSM) remains the mainstream approach within the U.S. (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 145).

After having established the nature of loneliness, in Chapter 7, “The Unconscious and the Subconscious” (Mijuscovic, 2015, pp. 149-172), Mijuscovic seeks to discover whether or not a person can be lonely and be *unaware* that they are lonely. Using the example of Arthur Machen’s *The Hill of Dreams*, the author shows how the experiences of the main character demonstrate unconscious or subconscious reactions from a deeply hidden loneliness. The novel chronicles the experiences of a boy named Julian from adolescence to adulthood and shows how he gradually retreats into fantasy and other forms of escapism in order to cope with his isolation. Mijuscovic draws on this example to demonstrate how loneliness often causes one to withdraw internally, sometimes to a self-destructive point of disintegration. He notes, “during extreme episodes of loneliness the self needs to do all it can to conduct a search for a balanced emotional state between destructive narcissism and restorative intimacy” (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 154). If the self fails to restore intimacy, it will continue to invest in methods of withdraw. Later in the chapter,

the author uses Hegel to establish the power of the subconscious mind and its ability to permeate waking consciousness through disturbances (in some cases leading to insanity). Indeed, the quote Mijuscovic uses to define madness, “a separation from actuality” (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 161), appears to define loneliness at its most extreme. The importance of connecting loneliness with madness and either internal or external destruction is a point which would seem particularly relevant for contemporary American society, where a new mass killing appears in the news seemingly every month. Indeed, often news pundits are the first to describe the perpetrators as “mentally ill loners.” While undoubtedly neurological abnormalities can contribute to the development of disorders and diseases (ex. schizophrenia) which lead to destructive behavior, very often such behavior is demonstrated by individuals who appear physiologically “normal” but have underlying emotional disturbances often rooted in loneliness. Relying on Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Freud, the author posits that these disturbances have ways of “surging” like an “insidious force” (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 164) from the subconscious mind, manifesting themselves in nightmares and destructive acts during waking consciousness. For Mijuscovic, the subconscious is a dark cavern dwelling just beneath the “fragile cloak of sanity” (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 169), which begins to crack open during extreme states of loneliness. While the author does recognize potential positive aspects of the subconscious, such as pleasant dreams, fantasies, etc., the reader is warned of the particular power of negative expressions rooted in loneliness which have a way of consuming the psyche.

The final chapter, “Therapeutic Measures” (Mijuscovic, 2015, pp. 173-194), takes the reader into applied methods of alleviating loneliness through: insight, intentionality, strategic planning, fantasy, trust, empathy, and intimacy. Religion is also mentioned as a possible form of alleviation, by assuring individuals of their eternal connection to divine love and companionship and endowing their existence with a purpose. Crucial to the chapter is Mijuscovic’s notion that liberation from loneliness will come not from feeling, but from understanding (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 174). By realizing that people are not alone in their experience of loneliness, they not only feel empathy and intimacy with others, but also realize that their shared experience unites them together in confronting a common foe. Acknowledging their individual freedom is also essential. While free will may necessarily prescribe loneliness, it also endows individuals with the ability to intentionally create their own meanings and values. The principle of reciprocity can be used to invest trust in others with the hope of them returning the favor. Exercise is also presented as a positive therapeutic measure, in that it “transforms the

intentionality principle into a physical goal” (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 193), a goal which is often motivated by a desire to make one’s self better for others. Mijuscovic also recognizes the positive aspects of fantasy, but shies away from going too deep into it by simply relying upon Aristotle’s maxim “everything in moderation” (Mijuscovic, 2015, p. 182). It would have been insightful to have had the author’s perspective on the possible benefits of positive visualization, meditation, and imagination in resolving loneliness.

In conclusion, Mijuscovic’s *Feeling Lonesome: The Philosophy and Psychology of Loneliness* is a well researched, highly intricate, and aptly argued contribution to the study of phenomenology. For the theoretical philosopher, the book is a rich source of gripping debates which draws from a variety of great thinkers. For the psychologist, anthropologist, and general social scientist, Mijuscovic has much to offer on the human condition. For those currently struggling to escape the clutches of loneliness, the author offers, at the very least, an insightful and worthwhile approach to understanding how and why we feel lonesome, and what we can do to change that.

Reference

Mijuskovic, B. (2015). *Feeling lonesome: The philosophy and psychology of loneliness* (pp. xi-197). Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.