

Book Review

Consciousness and Loneliness: Theoria and Praxis by Ben Lazare Mijuscovic

Reviewed by Joshua Marcus Cragle
University of Amsterdam

Ben Lazare Mijuscovic addresses the problem of loneliness in his recent book *Consciousness and Loneliness: Theoria and Praxis*. Building on his prior work, Mijuscovic utilizes an interdisciplinary approach to present a metaphysical subjective dualism in favor of a “substantive theory of the self and the innate quality of loneliness” (Mijuscovic, 2019, p.3). The author challenges reductionist materialism and scientific determinism, arguing that neither of these adequately account for the activity of human consciousness or the self’s “inescapable sense of enclosed subjective isolation” (Mijuscovic, 2019, p.4). Instead, Mijuscovic demonstrates a psychological framework in which the self is motivated by a fear of loneliness and the desire for intimacy. The author thoroughly substantiates his perspective via a ‘History of Ideas’ format, which engages Plato’s metaphor of ‘the Battle between the Gods and the Giants,’ an allusion to the historical debate between idealists and materialists. Ultimately, these two groups and their allies attempt to address the question: can senseless matter think? The idealists, with whom Mijuscovic identifies, assert the reality of the self, reflexive self-consciousness, and the spontaneity of the mind. For the materialists, the mind is deterministically relegated to the brain and chemical interactions (Mijuscovic, 2019, p. 9).

Mijuscovic addresses the problem of thinking matter and a unified self-consciousness by arguing in favor of an immaterial and active consciousness, partially via Plato’s model of multi-level qualitatively distinctive consciousness. Within these layers can be found the subconscious; a mysterious well of spontaneous activity that manifests desires. Having

asserted the reality of the subconscious, Mijuscovic criticizes materialists for dismissing qualitative experiences within the subconscious mind, arguing instead that they cannot be reduced to sensations. Consider the questions: Are one's thoughts in space? Or, can you give a physical description of a thought? The author would argue that you cannot. Materialist interpretations of consciousness should not be interpreted as established science, but as a worldview that "reduces all reality to matter and motion" (Mijuscovic, 2019, p. 50). For example, Mijuscovic is critical of Hume's notion of a temporal succession of impressions, which interprets the mind as simply passive and reactive to external stimuli. Instead, Mijuscovic argues, awareness of a succession of impressions is impossible "without presupposing a permanent, underlying self connecting, synthesizing, binding, and thus unifying past-present-future time in the same temporally extended consciousness" (Mijuscovic 2019, pp. 34-35). Consciousness engages in agency.

In order to have a unified self-consciousness, there must be a repetitively recognized awareness of the activities of the mind belonging to "me" and no one else. We exhibit a "self-enclosed consciousness," in which other minds can only be inferred, resulting in a feeling of being trapped in solipsism (Mijuscovic, 2019, pp. 22-23). Without a sense of self and separation, loneliness wouldn't even be possible. It is therefore necessary for the author to demonstrate "the twin aspects of consciousness," namely: reflexivity and intentionality (Mijuscovic, 2019, p. 27). This reflexive consciousness is seen in the Platonic notion of a metaphorically circular soul, "it initiates its own activity from within its self and reflexively returns those thoughts back to its self as their source; it thinks about its own thoughts and knows what it is thinking about" (Mijuscovic, 2019, p. 41). Reflexive self-consciousness has been held historically to some degree or another by virtually all dualists, rationalists, and idealists. Relying on this legacy, Mijuscovic proposes a form of metaphysical dualism that posits a working relationship between an immaterial mind and matter which act in consonance. The spontaneous freedom of consciousness, what Kant's calls "productive imagination" and Fichte refers to as an "act of self-creation", defies deterministic interpretations of consciousness that rely upon causality (Mijuscovic, 2019, pp. 138-140). Instead, these unpredictable impulses emerge from the subconscious; which is responsible for our intellectual, ethical, artistic, and darker expressions. Mijuscovic explores this notion through an analysis of Schopenhauer's irrational Will. Based on Schopenhauer's views, we are condemned to be self-aware of what we feel, but unable to understand how or why we feel certain urges, leading to a consistent anxious state of confusion. The irrational Will is essentially a force of

self-preservation and self-expression, which activates our narcissistic tendencies. These narcissistic tendencies serve as the base of the self, leading to “entitlement, vanity, and pride” (Mijuscovic, 2019, pp. 217-220). Mijuscovic is inclined to agree with Schopenhauer and the darker ramifications of his conclusions. However, rather than relegating these irrational impulses to the Will, he relegates them to the subconscious.

Mijuscovic continues his critique of scientific determinism by applying it to the experiences of love and loneliness. How can one isolate these states of being in the brain? Loneliness is “encrusted with feelings of abandonment, betrayal, isolation, jealousy, anxiety, etc.” (Mijuscovic, 2019, p. 202). The meaning of these interconnected qualitative experiences cannot be explained *merely* by synapses. Furthermore, self-consciousness and reflexivity cannot be explained away as “feedback loops,” which relay information to the brain via external stimuli. Mijuscovic partially relies upon Raymond Tallis, who asserts that neuroscience is incapable of accounting for the intentionality of consciousness, and also that consciousness is seemingly both a unified force as well as a multiplicity. This aligns with Mijuscovic’s description of the experience of loneliness, “a dynamic flowing state of consciousness that indicates a constituted *multiplicity of emotions in a unity*; a complex of *shifting* feelings and meanings” (Mijuscovic, 2019, p. 308). This is an important factor to keep in mind when one considers how readily individuals experiencing qualitative states of being are being diagnosed with disorders and prescribed medicines they may not need. Mijuscovic and Tallis would have us remember, “correlation does not equal causation.” As an example, Mijuscovic critiques D. M. Armstrong’s *A Materialist Theory of Mind*. Specifically, he refutes Armstrong’s association of thoughts with “the material motions of the brain,” as well as his use of “inner self-scanning processes” as a means of replacing reflexive self-consciousness (Mijuscovic, 2019, pp. 325-326). For Armstrong, brain activity and human behavior are the byproduct of a stimulus-response pattern, which Mijuscovic argues reduces the brain to a passive recipient. Mijuscovic admits that while we require the brain for consciousness, the brain also requires consciousness in order to know itself.

As Mijuscovic’s work concludes he explores Julian Jaynes’ bicameral theory of the mind, an evolutionary consciousness model which posits that the mind originally contained two “chambers” acting in unison. One of these acted as a “divine voice,” which Mijuscovic likens to Schopenhauer’s “irrational Will,” as well as his own belief in the stirrings of the subconscious (Mijuscovic, 2019, p. 371). Mijuscovic agrees with Jaynes, particularly in regards to the correlation between the bicameral mind and internal forces of spontaneity that lead to unpredictable behavior,

which Mijuscovic argues is rooted in narcissistic tendencies to have one's existence validated. Following his overview of Jaynes, Mijuscovic shifts towards comparative ideas presented by mystical philosophers, such as Plotinus and Boheme. Relying on Neo-Platonism, these thinkers tend to interpret Reality in monistic terms, as a Unity containing a multiplicity of expressions. A multifaceted unity that emanates various manifestations can be readily applied to Mijuscovic's model of consciousness, which contains primitive impulses as well as higher orders of consciousness, both stemming from the "dark abyss" of the subconscious (Mijuscovic, 2019, pp. 377-379). This model offers an alternative explanation for the interpretation of evil, which according to many mystical interpretations is simply one aspect of Being. For these thinkers, "the unconscious, the darkness, and evil in man are *already* and *eternally* there from the beginning (Mijuscovic, 2019, p. 384). The author correlates the relationship between rejection, madness, and schizophrenia; suggesting these states cause consciousness to withdraw into a state of solipsism. Often a result, there is a lashing out that leads to destructive behavior. Potential for experiencing psychosis and delusional states exist just beneath the surface of our subconscious, which "makes us vulnerable to the duress of extreme loneliness" (Mijuscovic, 2019, p. 398). Even entire societies fall prey. Mijuscovic uses Germany in the aftermath of World War I as an example, which found itself alienated and humiliated after losing the war. As a result, many Germans fell prey to Nazi propaganda which offered notions of racial supremacy (narcissism) and external scapegoats for their humiliation (Mijuscovic, 2019, p. 412).

Loneliness implies a lack of belonging, an emptiness and sense of separation from those we desire to be connected with. According to Mijuscovic, when we fail to achieve intimacy, we typically respond by "withdrawing within the self," entering a state of depression, or by "exploding beyond the confines of the self," leading to manic episodes in an attempt to escape our isolation by running away from it (Mijuscovic, 2019, p. 415). Neither of these methods prove helpful. Instead, the best alleviation of loneliness is simply to help others, as it "gets you outside of yourself" (Mijuscovic, 2019, p. 417). By helping others, we build intimacy and develop empathy through the mutual establishment of trust. Such is the author's concluding advice for an age of displacement, overmedication, and social isolation.

Reference

Mijuscovic, B. (2019), *Consciousness and loneliness: Theoria and praxis*. Boston, MA: Brill.