

Loneliness as an Experience of Emptiness

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ABSTRACT: Current works on loneliness as a phenomenon mostly explore its social causes and consequences. Scholars are often interested in such things as examining of the kinds of social setting that engender one's feeling or experience of loneliness, the health and moral hazards that come with such an experience, and the ways in which loneliness could be remedied. The angle at which these works approach loneliness indicates a particular way of framing this experience – that loneliness is an undesirable experience of an individual who is often in a deprived or isolated state in relation to others. Or to put it more explicitly, an individual's loneliness experience is considered as being caused by a certain undesirable interactive type of social relationship that neglects the significance of the individual as a person. There are two aspects – metaphysical and phenomenological - to be highlighted under this framework. First, the metaphysical aspect points to the explanatory nature of the framework for one's experience of loneliness. Specifically, scholars attempt to understand loneliness by seeking what (mainly) causes it. Given that what was found as the main cause was the deprivation or the non-existence of social assistance or interpersonal goods, scholars often understand loneliness as such. Second, the phenomenological aspect of the existing framework is that, based on the explanatory aspect, the experience of loneliness is thus often understood or theorized as that of absence given the resultant actual or perceived deprivation or loss of those goods. In the paper, I will focus on the second aspect that loneliness is understood with the concept of absence, and I argue that this concept is phenomenologically inadequate. I propose to replace it with the concept of emptiness, and I argue that loneliness should be understood as the intentional experience of (the presence of) emptiness. The advantage in choosing this term, as I see it, is that it is experientially richer in that it captures the affective and bodily nature of our being in dealing with or making sense of things and the space in which they occupy.

KEYWORDS: loneliness, presence, absence, object-directed, subject-directed

I. Introduction

Current works on loneliness as a phenomenon mostly explore its social causes and consequences. Scholars are often interested in such things as examining of the kinds of social setting that engender one's feeling or experience of loneliness, the health and moral hazards that come with such an experience, and the ways in which loneliness could be remedied. The angle at which these works approach loneliness indicates a particular way of framing this experience – that loneliness is an undesirable experience of an individual who is often in a deprived or isolated state in relation to others. Or to put it more explicitly, an individual's loneliness experience is considered as being caused by a certain undesirable interactive type of social relationship that neglects the significance of the individual as a person. There are two aspects – metaphysical and phenomenological - to be highlighted under this framework. First, the metaphysical aspect points to the explanatory nature of the framework for one's experience of loneliness. Specifically, scholars attempt to understand loneliness by seeking what (mainly) causes it. Given that what was found as the main cause was the deprivation or the non-existence of social assistance or interpersonal goods, scholars often understand loneliness as such. Second, the phenomenological aspect of the existing framework is that, based on the explanatory aspect, the experience

of loneliness is thus often understood or theorized as that of absence given the resultant actual or perceived deprivation or loss of those goods. In the paper, I will focus on the second aspect that loneliness is understood with the concept of absence, and I argue that this concept is phenomenologically inadequate. I propose to replace it with the concept of emptiness, and I argue that loneliness should be understood as the intentional experience of (the presence of) emptiness. The advantage in choosing this term, as I see it, is that it is experientially richer in that it captures the affective and bodily nature of our being in dealing with or making sense of things and the space in which they occupy.

II. The Experiences of Absence and Emptiness

Roberts and Krueger (2021) in “Loneliness and the Emotional Experience of Absence” provide an account of loneliness as an emotional *absence* for the loss of social goods. Working in a social and interpersonal angle, they argue that those who experience loneliness essentially experience “the feeling that certain social goods are missing and out of reach, temporarily or permanently” (Roberts & Krueger, 2021, p.186). By “social goods” that are out of reach for those who feel lonely, Roberts and Krueger (2021) mean *deeply* interpersonal goods in social relationships, such as “companionship, moral support, physical contact and affection...” and, thus, the opportunity to act and interact...as a social agent” (p. 191). These goods are deeply desired and can only be attained through “distinctive kinds of social connections” (p. 191); what “absence” means in this context, thus, according to the two authors, is a lack or *unattainability* of these goods (Roberts & Krueger, 2021). As I take it, the absence of desired social goods is a tangible *loss* that results in a subjective experience of absence which constitutes the individual’s emotional experience of loneliness. That is, in realizing (cognitively or perceptually) that those goods are desirable and yet cannot be obtained - i.e., in realizing the *unattainability* of them or one’s inability to access them, one experiences loneliness.

Health experts and ethicists (e.g., Heu. L. C., et al., 2021; Brownlee, 2013) also support the idea that the negative experience of loneliness is engendered by a certain *loss* in social and interpersonal interaction. Loneliness, as they consider, is a social isolation *perceived* by the subject with a variety of adverse health issues that such a perception generates; and in regarding loneliness as such an experience, Brownlee thereby argues that there is a need to honour human capacity for social interactions, and that there should be a human right against social isolation and deprivation (Brownlee, 2013). This line of argument suggests that the individual’s perception of social isolation is derived from the loss of social goods in human relationships and interactions. As I see it, such a perception resembles the feeling of absence described by Roberts and Krueger.

II.a. The Phenomenological Inadequacy of Mere Absence

However, I think that the concept of absence is phenomenologically inadequate to capture the experientially rich manner in which we are struck and confronted by loneliness. The concept of absence is, as I see it, a categorical and logical understanding and representation of a factual status. It tells us about what happens as a matter of fact, it does not, however, express the experiential force of one’s experience of feeling lonely in confronting the non-present. I should concede that it is an intuition that loneliness is constituted by such a state of absence from certain loss. Generally, we often frame and express our loneliness feeling as something being missing, or that something is not there (in my life)¹. Such a framing indicates a conceivable absence or lack of existence of that something by us. Accordingly, we tend to describe and theorize our

¹ In expressing the feeling of something being missing, one need not realize whether or not one indeed feels lonely, I think.

experience of loneliness as such. However, it seems to me that the concept of absence is only a conceptual and theoretical understanding and description of one's state of loneliness. It is not, as I see it, how one experiences and understands it. Expressing that it feels like something² is missing, I think, only represents the kind knowledge and understanding that we gain through the understanding of how the principles of logic function. That is, given that we always know that "something is" and "something is not" cannot co-exist, that existence and non-existence cannot co-exist, we also tend to frame our feelings about them as such. However, framing our feelings conceptually does not mean that we in fact experience this way and that it gives us deeply human and personal meaning; that is, it does not capture the nuances and intricacies involved in our subjective experiences that could reveal our deep and practical understanding of those experiences as the kind of being we are as humans. Alternatively, a practical and meaningful understanding should be a concrete bodily experience of emptiness as the way in which we are disclosed by loneliness. Such an experience is derived from confronting an empty space that we carved up for something we desire but without an actual presence, a space that we deem untouchable and irreplaceable by anything else.

II.b. The Spatially Embodied Experience of Emptiness

Take the example of losing a loved one in a romantic relationship³, as a result of either a separation or that person's death. Among many other common feelings, such as sorrow and devastation, loneliness is also often associated with such a loss. In this experience, the remaining person in the relationship feels lonely because the other person is no longer there with them and that they are being left alone⁴. They would not have such a feeling were the other remained in the relationship. What contributes to their loneliness experience, I argue, is the concrete empty space generated from the loss of the physical existence of their loved one. Such a space is objective and experience-independent, that it is simply a *factual* status of the non-presence or absence of a person. However, it is necessarily *experienced* by the person in a subjectively and contextually meaningful way. Such an experientially spatial experience of the other person not being present, I argue, is the experience of emptiness.

When there was *not* an empty space in the sense of physical dimension, that is, when the loved one was present, there was an experiential unity between two people, characterized by a *being-together-ness*. This unity is necessarily constituted by the two, and it is experienced as a complete entity wherein one part is inseparable from the other, that one's personhood is essentially fused with the other. In the event of losing the physical existence of the loved one, an empty space is created, given that a hollow or void appears in the essential unity, making it no longer complete. That is, what is *supposed* to be in the unity is no longer there. The person remaining in the relationship loses the essential otherness or otherhood in the unity; the empty space, that is, is experienced by another person as a loss of experiential spatiality which they used to share with the other. In this process, the actual spatial dimension brings forth the experiential spatial dimension; that is, it is the factual status of the empty space that engenders the subjective experience of that empty space. This is because we are affectively *struck* when we are confronted with the abrupt emergence of an empty space, a void that is not supposed to be

2 I use the word "something" here as opposed to "object" because, as I will argue later, one need not have clear

objects of intention for one to experience loneliness. Given this, I think "something" might be more apt for now.

3 I am assuming the relationship to be monogamous.

4 I am also assuming, for the moment, that losing one's partner is the greatest, if not the only, relevant reason for

one's current loneliness experience.

there, or a void that is supposed to be filled by a certain thing *designated* and *anticipated* by us. This is the experience of emptiness. In being left alone in the unity, then, one experiences an emptiness that is constitutive of the experience of loneliness.

From the example above, we find that, rather than experiencing an absence theoretically understood, what one experiences in confronting the non-presence of something is the presence of a sense of emptiness derived from the empty space. Such an emptiness, though not having a tangible presence, is nevertheless experienced by us as a physically intangible but experientially concrete existence. This experience is not merely imaginative; rather, we have a concrete bodily experience of it. For we feel as if something occupies the space that it should be at, while it in fact does not. Moreover, in so feeling, we deem this space as untouchable and unfulfillable by anything else (temporarily or permanently). In turn, we carve up a space for which it is supposed to be taking up. This is to say that the experiential spatiality is necessarily an embodied experience.

The source of such a tendency, I think, is our past experience of interacting or being with that something, which consists of particular behavioural patterns. In the case of losing a loved one, for example, the source of our concrete feeling of the presence of emptiness is the past experience of being in the unity with that person, with the bodily experiences of acting and partaking in daily lives as if that person was still present. That is, as Thompson (2007) suggests, our body is *habitual* and that it “can act as guarantee for the body [we have now]” (p. 33), meaning that our body “is a developmental being thick with its own history and sedimented ways of feeling, perceiving, acting, and imagining” (p. 33). Simply, our body *remembers* and acts on our past memories. In being habitual, our body *anticipates* that something should be there even in the event of our *knowing* that that something is no longer there. In knowing that we have lost our loved one, our body still habitually anticipates that that person would still be there with us physically just like before, because “[e]arlier experiences are affectively awakened by later ones on the basis of their felt similarities, and they motivate the anticipation that what is to come will cohere with the sense or meaning of experience so far” (Thompson, 2007, p. 32). Therefore, our experience of emptiness derived from the actual empty space is necessarily bodily with our habit-body.

III. Two Forms of the Experience of Emptiness

I have argued that our experience of something not being there should be characterized as a presence of emptiness given the spatial and bodily nature of our experience. I also wish to highlight the desired object of intentionality in the emptiness experience. In experiencing the non-presence of something, we are *intending* towards that thing; but since the actual object is not physically present, our intending towards it cannot be fulfilled. That is, we have a concrete object of desire to be intended where this intention of act is, nevertheless, unfulfillable. Let’s call this form of intentional experience “object-directed emptiness.”

III.a. Object-Directed Emptiness

In the case of losing the physical existence of one’s loved one, one’s desired object of intentionality is one’s loved one, or what is supposed to be there in the essential unity of the relationship. That intentionality can never be fulfilled given that our loved one is no longer there; but given the space we carved out with our habit-body for what we expect to be intended, we experience a concrete presence of an emptiness. Another example for this object-directed emptiness could be that a person had just accidentally broken their favorite mug which they used to have coffee for the past five years. Every morning when the person wakes up (after this accident), however, they still intend to reach for the mug for coffee, naturally and habitually. The mug is their object of intentionality. It is when they realize that the mug is in fact no longer there that a feeling of emptiness occurs; for they also realize that what they are intending towards is nothing but an

empty projection. In any case, one experiences an emptiness because a hollow is created from the non-presence of an object that is supposed to be present. What these two examples have in common about their objects of desire is their *external* relation to the subject.

There is a distinctive kind of object that is *internally* related to one, and I suggest that it can give rise to the kind of emptiness experience that is *intrapersonal*. I identify this internal object as one's *desired* form of *self* that is being intended by one's present form of self (with which one currently identifies). Accordingly, the experience of emptiness occurs when the latter intends towards the former with only an empty form, given that what is *desired* is not (yet) what *is*.

In her analysis on loneliness, Hannah Arendt suggests that it is the lack of unity between "myself" and "me" that engenders one's sense of loneliness. She distinguishes the experience of solitude from that of loneliness, arguing that the former is a "two-in-one" concept in which "I [the subject] am 'by myself', together with my self" (Arendt, 1985, p. 467). In loneliness, on the other hand, one lacks such a unity; Arendt (1985) argues that in such an experience one "loses trust in [one]self as the partner of [one's] thoughts (p. 467). What makes up loneliness, according to Arendt (1985), is "the loss of one's own self which can be realized in solitude" (p. 467). As I take it, one experiences in loneliness a *split* of one's concept of self between "myself" and "me" - a split of the *two-in-one* concept of self. The essence of the unified self, I think, is the *alignment* of what one *desires* one to be and what one currently *is*; the objects of "myself" and "me," thus, are the two elements accordingly (irrespective of the order). In a split, one has a desired form of self which does not align with one's present form of self. In experiencing the internal split, one derives the feeling of emptiness, because the desired form of self - the object of intentionality - is never fulfilled.

So far, I've examined the object-directed kind of emptiness experience; now, I wish to identify another form of emptiness experience where there is no such a clear object of desire.

III.b. Non-Object-Directed Emptiness

As I claimed before, unlike the object-directed form, there is another form of emptiness experience which is not related to objects. For this experience, there is a sense in which there is something desired whose object of intentionality is unclear or even unidentifiable. That is, one does not know what exactly is being intended while still feeling and experiencing an emptiness, that one could feel that there is something to be intended that causes one's emptiness feeling and experience while not knowing about or having the desired object of intentionality. In the rest of the section, I will explore it by identifying three forms of awareness that an individual has in feeling empty: pre-reflective awareness of our bodily separateness, awareness of the presence of an empty space, and awareness of the presence of one's self. I will then highlight the relationship among them in which that emptiness experience can be generated, and I argue that what makes this form existential is the fact that we are readily aware (in a non-cognitive or pre-reflective way) of our separation between our bodies and the external world.

Pre-reflective Awareness of Bodily Separateness

We can agree that we have a fundamental sense of bodily ownership for ourselves which cannot be possessed by someone else, given that we are pre-reflectively aware that our bodies are separate from others. In other words, we could say that one's sense of bodily ownership is essentially embedded in one's having a body that is separate from others. That is, our sense of bodily separateness is inevitable.

Awareness of the Presence of One's Sense of Self

Accompanied with one's bodily ownership, there is also one's ownership to a sense of the personal. One's self-ownership and bodily ownership, therefore, are interconnected and intertwined. Our pre-reflective awareness of bodily separateness is to be seen as a *primal* condition to our (reflective) awareness of our sense of self.

Awareness of the Presence of an Empty Space

Given our bodily separateness, an empty space is necessarily generated between individuals and defined by their bodily boundaries. As I suggested before when discussing the object-directed kind of emptiness, one's loneliness experience has a *spatial* dimension such that one is aware of the presence of such a physical space, either perceptually or conceptually. Given our pre-reflective awareness of a bodily separateness, we identify a boundary and thereby create an empty space between our body and others. Through seeing, touching, and other perceptual means, I acquire a sense of bodily ownership, and I also thereby know that there is a necessary distance and space between us. The space between us is clearly established, because I know that I have no private access to or authority over that person's body. What this suggests is that our pre-reflective awareness of bodily separateness is also a *primal* condition to our (reflective) awareness of an empty space.

Note that such an empty space does not only exist between bodies; it is simply one that exists outside of one's own body - meaning that it is simply the space between one's own body and everything else that is not and does not belong to that body. Also note that this empty space is different from the one I discussed in the object-directed kind of emptiness; for, while the latter is an empty form of an object (which is supposed to be instantiated), the former is simply the empty space between individuals generated from the fundamental bodily separateness, which is intrinsically *unfulfillable*.

As I see it, these three kinds of awareness form a specific relationship with one another in which there is an underlying possibility for a non-object-directed emptiness experience to be generated. That is, depending on the overall context in which an individual is situated, she could have various degrees in which those kinds of awareness are interrelated that could affect the intensity of one's experience of emptiness. This relation is simply that, given the pre-reflective and inevitable sense of one's bodily separateness, the more pronounced one's awareness of the self is, the more one is aware of the empty space between oneself and others. Such a pronounced awareness of an empty space gives rise to the feeling and experience of emptiness, for the strong sense of bodily space felt by the individual is inseparable from a strong affective sense⁵.

Take the case of an individual's loneliness experience in a crowd: imagine one standing in a street with busy strangers passing by constantly. Despite being surrounded by people, one experiences loneliness in this case with various degrees of intensity. What is grounded in this experience, I argue, is an emptiness experience of non-object-directed form of emptiness in which one's awareness of the empty space between one and others becomes pronounced. This is because one's awareness of one's personal sense of self becomes pronounced given that the pre-reflective awareness of bodily separateness is being heightened, and the reason for the pre-reflective awareness of bodily separateness becoming heightened is the quickly *passing-by* of the strangers where there is a great sense of bodily separateness that one experiences.

Another example in which loneliness is experienced with the non-object-directed form of emptiness concerns the immense *spaciousness* of an environment in which one is situated and confronted. Such environments could be the desert, the ocean, the outer space, or vast spaces in our ordinary life, where the space is characterized by boundlessness, spatial emptiness, and perhaps lifelessness. Walking in the desert, for example, one could experience these traits to an overwhelming extent, given its vastness and lack of living beings. In this case, one experiences loneliness with the existential form of emptiness, given that one perceives the immense

5 On the contrary, despite the pre-reflective and inevitable sense of one's bodily separateness, if one has a weakened awareness of one's self, one would perhaps be less aware of the empty space between oneself and others. In this case, then, the intensity (or even possibility) of one's experiencing emptiness is reduced

external emptiness that encloses one generated by the antithesis between one and the space - the physical empty space between one and others *seems* infinite to one; that is, one's awareness of the empty space between one and the externality becomes pronounced. Again, this is because one's awareness of one's self becomes more pronounced due to a heightened pre-reflective awareness of bodily separateness. And what makes it heightened is the fact that there is a great bodily sense in which the individual is separated and far away from other things, including not only humans, but also living creatures in nature such as non-human animals and plants that are also bodily beings. In being away from them, one becomes more distinctively aware of one's bodily aloneness which in turn gives rise to one's more distinctive sense of self⁶.

From the above examples, we see that the existential emptiness is experienced without any clear desired object of intentionality. Such an emptiness experience is derived from the empty space between one's body and others which is intrinsically unfulfillable by any object, where this empty space arises from an inevitable bodily separateness. The fundamental difference between the two kinds of empty space is that, whereas the space in the object-directed kind has a desired object of intentionality in which it is to be intended with an empty form, the latter does not even have a form of *something* to be intended. It is only a space in which nothing is supposed to be filled. This form of emptiness, thus, is what I call the *non-object-directed emptiness*: it is elemental and existential given that it exists in us in a bodily and primal way. Different from the object-directed form of emptiness, one's *mere* existence is sufficient for the non-object-directed emptiness to be evoked, under circumstances or contexts in which our pre-reflective awareness of bodily separateness is heightened. To reiterate, what makes the type of emptiness experience existential (and thus fundamental) is the fact that we are readily aware of the empty space between our bodies and the externality.

III.c. Emptiness and Loneliness

I have discussed two forms of experience of emptiness in our loneliness experiences. One is the object-directed form in which a clear desired object is intended with an empty form, and the other one is the non-object-directed form in which there is no such object to be intended but only an existentially formed and inevitable empty space. A crucial question we should ask now is, how are the two forms related? And perhaps we could also ask further whether they overlap at all. I suggest that having the non-object-directed experience does not at all exclude one from simultaneously experiencing the object-directed form of emptiness by having other identifiable objects of desire that are not present. Moreover, I think all our experiences of emptiness necessarily consist of the non-object-directed form, or to put it more strongly, it is to be considered the elemental form of emptiness such that it in fact grounds our loneliness experience. This is to say that the object-directed form of emptiness is necessarily *secondary* to the non-object-directed form. In other words, while the former has a *narrow* form that is specifically object-focused, the latter has the *broader* form that is fundamental and existential to us.

Based on the above analysis, we now have a more complete account of loneliness, and we can thus revise the tentative account I provided before:

Loneliness is constituted by a spatially embodied experience of emptiness that comes with 1) an existential and *primary* form that is non-object-directed and 2) a *secondary* form that is object-directed.

⁶ The relationship among the three kinds of awareness that I am depicting here is, of course, a rough one. The actual phenomenological reality is much more entangled such that the three elements would certainly not interact with one another in the linear way that I described. It is simply not my intention to picture a perfect causal relationship between one another.

IV. Conclusion

To conclude, I have argued in this paper that the core experience of loneliness is a bodily experience of emptiness. I identified two forms of emptiness experience, object-directed and non-object-directed emptiness, and I argue that the latter is primary to the former. There is this relationship between them, because our experience of emptiness in loneliness is fundamentally existential that is not object-related, given our existential condition or the kind of *being* we are - that we are fundamentally separated from one another. In having this primal and shared existential experience, we are also able to experience the secondary form of emptiness that is attached to specific objects of desire.

My critique of many of the current works on loneliness means to point out the general oversight of the phenomenological aspect of loneliness. I think that the concept of emptiness can help us see the underlying *core* experience of loneliness. With this help, moreover, it might be able to account for loneliness occurred in potential and possible contexts other than (but not excluding) the social and interpersonal one.

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