**The Moral Threat of Profound Loneliness**

**(Presidential Address)**

Paul Carron

Baylor University

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**I. Introduction**

Ours is a wonderful but strange new world. We live in a truly global community, where we can instantly connect with anyone, anywhere on the planet. We are constantly connected to others, yet our students suffer from anxiety, depression, and related mental health problems at unprecedented and alarming rates (Twenge *et al*., 2019). While we can point to many possible causes and contributing factors to these ills, one simple fact should not be overlooked: our students are lonely, some profoundly so. This is, of course, not new. The sociologist Robert Putnam put this fact in the forefront of our minds when he argued that the second half of the 20th century witnessed the decline of what he called our “social capital,” or the fabric of our social connections and in particular our participation in civic organizations (1995, p. 67). We might wonder if this claim of plummeting social capital applies to our students since so many participate in everything from Greek life, to churches, to philanthropic organizations. But something has changed since Putnam first bemoaned the individualizing effects of the television in 1995. Televisions individualize by socially isolating us from each other: you watch television most often in your home. It is now entirely possible to be out in public, engaged in seemingly communal activities yet still experience profound loneliness, and this loneliness is a threat to our moral lives.

Loneliness as a moral threat may initially strike us as peculiar at best, or philosophical sensationalism at worst. But morality at its root consists of the norms, practices, and customs that bind together social groups. In the words of sociologist Émile Durkheim, “the practical function of morality (*morale*) is to make society possible…” (1887, p. 38; cited in Hall, 1991, p. 95). Morality comes from the Latin *moralis*, literally “pertaining to manners,” or “proper behavior of a person in society,” coined by Cicero as a translation of *ethika*.[[1]](#endnote-1) Aristotle notes that *ethikos*, "ethical," is derived from *ēthos*, "moral character," which is closely related to *ethos*, "custom” or “habit.” At the beginning of his discussion of friendship, Aristotle draws a connection between friendship and the *polis*, going so far as to say that legislators should be more concerned with friendship than justice since friendship is like concord that binds the *polis* together. Friendship is either a moral virtue or like a virtue because it performs a similar function to justice, motivating us to practice virtue towards others (*NE* 1130a). Even the rational philosopher Aristotle recognized that ‘‘our well-being is relational’’ (*kath’ heteron*) (*Eudemian Ethics* 1245b18; translation by Sherman, 1987, p. 596); loneliness threatens the common good of society, thus making friendship a noble activity. Inspired in part by Aristotle, MacIntyre proclaims in *After Virtue* that “a moral philosophy… characteristically presupposes a sociology” (1984, p. 22). The basic sociological premise that Aristotle, Durkheim, and MacIntyre share is that human beings have a nature that is social. And when we engage in common practices, social *forces* (or norms if you prefer) emerge, forces that have coercive power over individuals (Durkheim, 2010a, p. 113).[[2]](#endnote-2) When we become lonely and isolated and lose our sense of connection and shared practices, new social forces and norms will inevitably emerge; but these new social forces will challenge our capacity to live in community.

In Europe and America, the data is clear: loneliness is on the rise, but why, what is the cause (Surkalim *et al*., 2022; Denman, 2019)? Is this loneliness any different than the loneliness humans have experienced since time immemorial? I do agree with Putnam that a primary cause of this rise in lonely isolation is technology’s “individualizing” our leisure time (1995, p. 74). But Putnam was writing during the early hours of the internet age, years before the release of the first internet-connected blackberry. Our situation has deteriorated; now technology can isolate us even when we are in class, in church, at a conference, or among a crowd of people. The smartphone is a unique phenomenon that makes profound loneliness possible. I want to take a few minutes and explore what it is about the essence of the smartphone that has led to this situation, and why it poses a *moral* threat.

**II. Technology and Human Nature**

Writing while in exile in Brussels in 1847, Marx penned one of his more infamous declarations: “The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist” (Singer, 2018, p. 48). Philosophical criticism of technology was nothing new, going back at least to Plato’s *Phaedrus* in the western canon. And though his technological determinism was also not entirely new, his articulation is especially provocative and prophetic. Can it really be asserted that technological progress precedes and drives fundamental changes in human social conditions? It's not hard to find what appear to be confirming examples. Take the well-known case of perhaps the very first technology, fire. Fire allowed our human ancestors and hominin cousins to cook meat and hearty vegetables, vastly reducing the time it took to both consume and digest food. Cooking with fire also reduced the amount of time spent foraging and hunting and provided the body with much higher amounts of protein and vitamins. This, in turn, leads to adaptations; the intestine shortened which reduced energy consumption, and energy was diverted to the calorie-hungry brain. The jaw becomes smaller for less chewing and the forehead larger to make room for a proportionally gargantuan pre-frontal cortex (Vince, 2020, pp. 41-42). Big brains require big birth canals, but upright, animal-chasing hominins have narrower hips, so the brains of newborns had to be much smaller. Even half-baked babies are difficult to birth when they have gigantic craniums and are even more difficult to raise when they are born undeveloped and radically dependent for so long. “Alloparenting” became the norm, increasing the need for deep and wide social connections and social groups (Vince, 2020, p. 36). And because we have a steadier source of food, we begin to live in larger groups, and living in larger groups requires keeping track of more people, which necessitates gossip. The technology of fire radically transforms not just human culture and practice, but the human brain and mode of being in the world. It’s not hard to accept that technology determines human nature when thinking about fire. Maybe Marx was right after all.

Writing almost 100 years later, after the invention of telephones, planes, and the atomic bomb, Heidegger’s view of technology and its relationship to human nature is decidedly different from Marx’s. For Heidegger, technology is not simply the things that humans create that in turn affect us. Rather, technology is a mindset, a mode of being in the world, and a way that we encounter and understand the world. At its most fundamental level, technology is a mode of *revealing*. Objects can reveal truth in various ways. “We are questioning concerning technology,” Heidegger states, “and we have arrived now at *alêtheia*, at revealing. What has the essence of technology to do with revealing? The answer: everything. For every bringing-forth is grounded in revealing” (1993, p. 318). The fundamental way objects reveal themselves is through *phusis*. This is the primary sense in which Aristotle thinks that something is alive, that it has a soul. If the moving principle is within the object, then the revealing happens naturally, like a flower blooming. But the basic human-influenced form of revealing is *poièsis –* where “the bursting open belonging to bringing-forth (is found) not in itself, but in another (*en allói*), in the craftsman or artist” (1993, p. 317). A poem or a song can reveal truth that a lecture cannot; Heidegger’s example is forming a chalice out of silver and using it in a ritual feast which reveals something about the true possibilities of the silver (1993, p. 317); this transformation reveals our relationships to each other and the gods that we otherwise would not see. Until the craftsman gives form to the silver matter thus becoming a chalice, these possibilities in the silver are hidden from view—they are *concealed*. Thus, *poièsis* uncovers and reveals something about the reality of the object that would not otherwise be seen.

Heidegger discusses a third, newer form of revealing: technology. “*Technè* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poièsis*; it is something poietic,” Heidegger claims (1993, p. 318). Whereas the ancient understanding of *technè* includes bringing human skills and ingenuity to bear on raw materials that uncover possibilities in the materials not yet seen (like the chalice), the modern form of technology is evidenced primarily in the mechanisms of industrialization. Speaking about this truth, Heidegger states, “The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging [*Herausfordern*], which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such” (1993, p. 320). The essence of technology is a perceptual schema through which we encounter entities generally, including nature, ourselves, and, indeed, everything. It is a mode of interpreting and an expectation that we bring to bear on everything we encounter. Heidegger calls it *gestell*, an enframing (or positionality): “that way of revealing which holds sway in the essence of modern technology and which is itself nothing technological” (1993, p. 325). The essence of technology doesn’t have anything directly to do with its scientific or inventive aspects. Technology’s essence is *enframing*, a mode of concealing and challenging. “What kind of unconcealment is it, then,” Heidegger asks, “that is peculiar to that which comes to stand forth through this setting-upon that challenges? Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand…” (1993, p. 322). The technological mode of being reveals possibilities in nature that would otherwise be obscured, the possibility that everything – from natural resources to people – can be stored up, used, and replaced. Everything becomes a “standing-reserve [*Bestand*],” a limitless pile of resources to be mined, used, and disposed of. Seeing everything as standing-reserve is simultaneously a challenging, putting an unreasonable demand on nature and people.

Heidegger is clear that this mode of revealing is made possible by a particular human comportment – a mode of being – that long preceded the advent of industrialization. It was technological thinking that first understood nature in such a way that nature could be challenged to unlock its forces and energy. The challenging preceded the unlocking; the essence of technology is thus prior to natural science. Heidegger’s claim is that we already viewed the world in technological terms as something to be organized and used for specific ends not actualized by nature itself. But where did this mode of being come from? What made it possible? On the one hand, it is probably one of the deepest human drives to become the masters and possessors of nature, a drive that goes back at least to the first hominins' mastery of fire. But arguably the two biggest precursors to the technological mindset are older, more basic forms of technology – maps and personal clocks. Complex maps “translate a natural phenomenon into an artificial and intellectual conception of that phenomenon” (Carr, p. 41). Mapmaking and its utilization greatly increased our capacity for abstract thought. The personal clock, on the other hand, “helped create the belief in an independent world of mathematically measured sequences” (Mumford, 1963, p. 15; cited in Carr, 2010, p. 44). Maps and clocks open new possibilities and transform the way we encounter and interpret the world – in abstract, mathematical terms. The world becomes something to be quantified, carved up, and reimagined. Enframing cannot be far off.

Gesturing toward the ways that pieces of technology make the technological mode of being possible is, of course, itself a Marxist challenge to Heidegger’s understanding of technology. The mindset that made industrialization possible was itself made possible by prior pieces of technology. It’s not hard to argue that industrialization itself also transforms our mode of being in the world. Within a 50-year period in Manchester, England, thousands of people went from rarely traveling more than ten miles from their village where they lived among extended family and worked all day, every day to meet their basic needs, to moving into a city full of small factories, workshops, and despair (Spar, 2020, p. 65). Entire villages do not move to the cities, but rather individuals and small family units, or what would come to be known as the nuclear family. Once in the city, everything changes. Families move into tiny apartments without outdoor space or light and work incredibly long hours for terrible wages. After an initial decrease in the quality of life, it quickly rebounds and people begin to have access to better food, water, and health care. The explosion of the number of people in the cities – which Durkheim so eloquently noted in the late 19th century – directly challenges our social integration and solidarity. More people making more commodities need more resources – including more people to make the commodities – and the cycle continues. It's hard to imagine a world in which we see people as standing-reserve without these *material* realities. Even if the technological mindset or mode of being preceded industrialized technology, it is only able to fully manifest in a world with specific material conditions.

Heidegger (and Marx), of course, lived and died before the World Wide Web or smartphones, but Heidegger’s understanding of the uniquely technological mindset clearly anticipates and speaks to these inventions. My question here is simple: is the smartphone another instance of technological enframing, or is it something new, with a unique essence? Put differently, what kind of *poièsis* – bringing forth – is a smartphone? Is it a unique form of revealing, or is it merely derivative of *technè*? Surely this is a preposterous notion. After all, smartphones are just internet-connected computers in our pockets and bags. Why not ask if the internet is its own kind of *poièsis*? Or perhaps what we really should be investigating is social media. As we now know, social media use contributes to political polarization (Haidt, 2022), is correlated with increased levels of anxiety and depression (Keles, McCrae, and Grealish, 2020), and can cause empathy to plummet (Turkle, 2021). The internet itself, apart from any mobile use, can be quite isolating. While it’s impossible to deny that both technologies bring forth human modes of being in the world that might not have existed previously, the internet is not as radical nor encompassing as the smartphone. After all, the smartphone makes the internet and social media our constant companions, always ready and available. And only the smartphone allows us to be constantly connected, physically present but mentally elsewhere.[[3]](#endnote-3) While the internet has profoundly shaped how we engage with the world and even how our brains organize and take in information, only the smartphone can alter our psychological makeup and our fundamental mode of being in the world.

I want to explore three features of modern life – aspects of the human condition that one could argue have only been fully revealed or unearthed in the modern world – and ask if the smartphone alone makes possible any of these modern aspects of human nature. Authenticity, boredom, and loneliness. Authenticity is a positive mode of being, boredom can surely be positive but is not universally so, while few would argue that loneliness – distinct from being alone – is good for one’s soul. Authenticity strikes me as the most modern of these three features, so we turn first to it.

**III. Authenticity**

Charles Taylor’s definition of authenticity is a good starting point: “Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own” (1991, p. 29). Authenticity involves “creation and construction as well as discovery” (1991, p. 66). In its ideal form, developing an authentic self requires mutual recognition, dialogue, and horizons of significance that give a background of meaning to the individual’s originality. Taylor proposes that the essential features of authentic selfhood – i.e., that each individual person has something unique to offer the world that the individual must discover and to some extent, create and that happiness is found in realizing and expressing a unique self – would have never occurred to most people in history.

We might imagine that the smartphone has increased our capacity for self-discovery and creation. After all, it gives us more access to a much wider range of people and ideas. Smartphone “connectivity offers new possibilities for experimenting with identity and, particularly in adolescence, the sense of a free space, what Erik Erikson called the *moratorium*,” Turkle notes (2013, p. 152). What has often prevented individuals from realizing their authentic selves is the lack of awareness of others with similar interests and a community that can help provide the horizons of significance that Taylor stresses. The smartphone can be an aid here, as it provides both the connectivity and the space to explore and try out various identities, but what the smartphone offers is not much different from what the internet and social media in general can provide. And besides, authenticity did not suddenly appear with the internet. Writing in the rapidly industrializing Copenhagen, Kierkegaard provides one of the more provocative descriptions of authenticity in a journal entry from 1835: “What I really need is to get clear about what I must do, not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every act. What matters is to find a purpose, to see what it really is that God wills that I shall do; *the crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me*, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die” (JP, 5:5100). Furthermore, earlier technologies surely contributed to the development of this modern notion of authenticity; for instance, the printing press and the types of books and reading that develop as a result. Once books were printed, paragraphs, chapters, and tables of contents became more common and evidenced self-consciously complex and challenging arguments (Carr, 2010, p. 66). This required much more sustained concentration and focus, leading to what Nicholas Carr calls the “ethic of the book” (2010, p. 66). Reading becomes a silent, interior act and “both the sign of and a means to self-awareness, with the knower taking responsibility for what is known” (Carroll, 2007). There is a direct, unmediated connection between the reader and text, and the concentration and introspection required for this kind of reading make self-discovery possible.

Unlike the ethic of the book, the internet and smartphones mostly impede and corrupt our quest for authenticity. The self-discovery and creation required for self-actualization requires sustained attention and concentration. Without deep and persistent reflection, we cannot figure out what is unique about us and what we truly want to be (see Carr, 2010, p.119 for a related point). The internet does just the opposite to our brains; instead of sustained attention, we are constantly shifting gears, looking for nuggets of interesting information and social interaction, the next dopamine hit. What’s perhaps worse, the deep connection between people that provides the dialectical exchange needed for self-discovery is seldom found through our phones. We present caricatures of ourselves when communicating through these devices, controlling how we are portrayed to the other, carefully editing our identity (Turkle, 2013, p. 190). The intimacy and vulnerability that emerges from a conversation with a bounded person is replaced with the reassuring distance of speaking to a contrived persona. If anything, our phones make authentic self-discovery and exchange virtually impossible. So much for authenticity as the *poièsis* of the smartphone.

**IV. Boredom**

I don’t think it requires much imagination to conceive of a close relationship between smartphones and boredom. But we are asking if the smartphone reveals something about the world that would otherwise not come into view. Surely boredom has been our close companion at least since hominins began gathering around the fire, sharing stories and songs. Perhaps it's simply the astonishing fact that we are more bored than we have ever been despite a constant onslaught of entertainment and distraction. Once again, Heidegger might be of service. In his 1929-30 lecture course published as *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, he identifies three different forms of boredom: being bored *by* something, being bored *with* something, and profound boredom. “Boredom is, literally, ‘a long while’ (*Langeweile*)…. In each case, the time that we are ourselves is neither filled-up nor fulfilling” (Dahlstrom, 2013, p. 41). All three forms “of boredom manifests in relation to how time passes (*die Zeit vertreiben*) in that within each form, there are two related structural moments: being left empty (*Leergelassenheit*) and being held in limbo (*Hingehaltenheit*)” (Elpidorou and Freeman, 2019, p. 181). Being bored *by* something is perhaps the most common experience: sitting in the dentist’s office, waiting for our plane to taxi, listening to a lecture on Heidegger and smartphones. This experience holds us in limbo because “our situation does not let us do what we intended to do,” and leaves us empty and unfulfilled since we are not doing what we wish to do (Elpidorou and Freeman, 2019, p. 181). When we are bored *with* something – the second form – it is not clear what makes us bored, or even that we are bored; Heidegger claims that “we are *not* able to say *what* is boring us” (2001, p. 114). The cause of our boredom is “indeterminate” (*ibid.*). We are still held in limbo because we are not pursuing an activity that is meaningful to us (Elpidorou and Freeman, 2019, p. 182). Our mode of being in the world is “casualness ([*Lässigkeit*]” or being “left empty [*Leergelassenheit*]… in this casualness we abandon ourselves [*uns überlassen*] to our being there alongside and part of things” (Heidegger, 2001, p. 117). In this situation we are immersed in the crowd, the they, the *hoi polloi*, and this casualness of being makes us bored and leaves us empty since we have “left behind (*Sichzurucklassen*) our authentic, temporal, existential self” (Elpidorou and Freeman, 2019, p. 183). This activity in which we find ourselves bored “neither promotes our projects nor meaningfully stems from or relates to our past. As such, it not an authentic activity” (Elpidorou and Freeman, 2019, p. 185).

Heidegger identifies the third kind of boredom – *profound* boredom – by the phrase “it is boring for one” (2001, p. 134). Like the second kind of boredom, “…there is not some particular boring thing there” (2001, p. 138). “All and everything appears indifferent to us” (2001, p. 137). We have no motivating concerns or interests and cannot resist profound boredom since it is “unconditioned, overpowering, and extreme” (Elpidorou and Freeman, 2019, p. 185). Elpidorou and Freeman comment that “Because nothing matters to us and we are involved in anything, profound boredom leaves us empty. Because one's possibilities are foreclosed, profound boredom holds us in limbo” (2019, p. 184). However, profound is different from the previous two forms because it is a “fundamental mood (*Grundstimmung*)” that makes engagement with the world possible (2019, p. 186). Furthermore, “the more profound the boredom, the more silent, the less public, the quieter, the more inconspicuous and wide-ranging it is” (Heidegger, 2001, p. 134). Because it is overpowering, profound boredom compels us “to listen to what it has to tell us” (2001, p. 139) and motivates us “to become the author of our own lives, to choose what is proper to us” (Elpidorou and Freeman, 2019, p. 197). In this way, profound boredom makes philosophical inquiry possible.

It is obvious that there is a close relationship between smartphones and boredom. But for most of us what immediately comes to mind is that smartphones *alleviate* boredom. After all, anytime we are bored *by* something like waiting for our table or listening to a lecture, we immediately reach for our phones. And suddenly we aren’t bored anymore…at least not *by* something. We can distract ourselves, engage in mostly mindless or meaningless tasks or empty entertainment, and best of all, avoid introspection, interaction, or even casual mind-wandering. And to connect smartphones to profound boredom is surely absurd. Profound boredom focuses our attention by stripping away all other distractions and causes us to momentarily transcend the self and its temporal cares and to take stock of our lives. Smartphones do just the opposite. It is most likely that smartphones are the thing that we are bored *with*, perhaps profoundly so. The boredom *with* something that the smartphone brings about is a totalizing kind of boredom; precisely because we have this device that provides an endless stream of stimulation, we are now always bored *with* everything. This profound boredom *with* something is profound because it too has the “character of manifesting how things stand concerning us” (Heidegger, 2001, p. 136). How do things stand? Indifferent. Uninteresting. And we have the comportment of apathy as a result.

Being profoundly bored *with* something has a similar structure to the capital vice in the Christian tradition known as *acedia* or sloth. From the Greek *akidía* which literally means lack of care, sloth in the Christian tradition is the opposite of *dilegere*, the Latin word for diligence, which literally means to love (DeYoung, 2009, p. 81). Sloth isn’t laziness necessarily, it’s the lack of love for things that *matter*. Just inside the gates, in the vestibule of Dante’s *Inferno*, the slothful individuals race after a blank banner, endlessly pursued by hornets and wasps. Those who were uncommitted in life suffer from that same never-ending uncommitment in death.[[4]](#endnote-4) In Rebecca DeYoung’s words, both the “apathetic inertia of the lazy person and the perpetual motion of busy person” are instances of *acedia* (2009, p. 82). The acedic is a deeply bored person, their activities detached from their deepest cares and concerns, but the busy acedic doesn’t look bored at all, but rather constantly occupied. Once again, although smartphones may turn many more of us into profoundly bored, constantly distracted acedics, this is not a new revelation.

**V. Loneliness**

While boredom with something might be more prevalent and more profound with smartphones, it is not a new experience or mode of being in the world. That brings us to our third possibility, loneliness. We can identify three types of loneliness, two of which are unique to our modern world. Primordial loneliness – the feeling of isolation or separation – has existed at least since humans have lived in tribes. Loneliness as separation induces a kind of physical pain in an analogous way to hunger or fear – it heightens our awareness and sharpens our attention, motivating us to seek out solutions to these ailments. Primordial Loneliness is an evolved adaptive strategy that promotes survival. But primordial loneliness (or “social pain”) isn’t properly labeled *loneliness*, but rather an adverse stimulus that protects us from the danger of being isolated (Cacioppo and Patrick,2008, p. 78). Primordial loneliness is a response to objective features of one’s situation. Loneli*ness* is a relatively new word that signals its recent manifestation. The modern Greek μοναξιά (loneliness) is derived from the koine Greek word μοναξία (*monaxía*), which comes from the Ancient Greek μονάξ (*monáx*, “on one’s own, alone”), from μόνος (*mónos*, “alone”) (*OED Online*). Well into the 17th century, solitariness or being lonely was used in sermons to frighten churchgoers from sin – people were asked to imagine themselves in lonely places such as hell or the grave (Hill, 2020). *A Dictionary of the English Language* from 1755 defines the adjective ‘lonely’ solely in terms of the state of being alone. The current *Oxford English Dictionary* provides a final definition of loneliness:“the feeling of being alone; the sense of solitude; dejection arising from want of companionship or society.” The earliest usage of this existential form of loneliness appears in the early 19th century, e.g., when Wordsworth proclaims in *The Excursion* that “He grew up From year to year in loneliness of soul” (*OED Online*).

Loneliness as a subjective, existential condition is a revealing or uncovering not of the natural world, but of human nature, made possible by the modern form of technology Heidegger refers to. Industrialization brings people (mostly individuals, couples, and single-family units) into cities, breaking up villages and clans. Suddenly it becomes common to feel lonely or isolated while surrounded by thousands of other people. While Marx bemoaned industrialization for making workers into commodities, Durkheim focused on how the division of labor in industrialized societies weakened the bonds between individuals, resulting in the erosion of social integration. Durkheim found that people with fewer social connections or who experienced weaker social integration – to religious groups, families, or otherwise – were more prone to suicide (2010b, p. 132).[[5]](#endnote-5)

Before she left to teach at Berkeley, Hannah Arendt published an essay on “Ideology and Terror” (1953), using the term *verlassenheit* – a state of being abandoned, or abandon-ness – for loneliness (Hill, 2020). Her focus is totalitarianism as a new form of government, but she argues that *verlassenheit* is a condition made possible by our modern world. “What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the nontotalitarian world,” writes Arendt, “is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the ever-growing masses of our century” (1953, p. 326). Heidegger recognizes that technology is a revealing and a concealing, but for him, it reveals a different truth about nature, a truth made possible by a particular human posture towards and perception of nature. But once in existence, industrialized technology also brings forth a potentiality – a *dunamis* – of human nature, the potential for the *subjective* experience of loneliness in a crowd.

Thus, existential loneliness is born of modern technology. Modern industrialized cities (what Heidegger just calls technology) transformed an ancient form of loneliness – isolation or apartness – into existential abandoned-ness. This form of loneliness reveals a truth about our human nature – that we can feel alone in a crowd, threatened by a sense of isolation that is more imagined than real – but this revelation was made possible by the technology of the industrial revolution. The smartphone – not cinema, television, the personal computer, or even google – revealed a new, third form of loneliness. It’s more hidden than existential loneliness yet comparable. With existential loneliness, we are alone in the midst of other physical people, on a crowded street in London, in a ballpark in Chicago. Despite hundreds or thousands of people to talk to and connect with, the existentially lonely soul feels no connection to any of them. The *profoundly* lonely person now has literally millions of people and thousands of ballgames in their pockets yet is isolated from the intimate person sitting next to them at dinner. Arendt claimed that isolation prepared people for totalitarian domination by causing them to “lose the capacity of both experience and thought” (1953, p. 321). Isolation also thwarts collective action: isolated people are powerless by definition (1953, p. 322). *Verlassenheit* cuts off thinking and action. Profound loneliness cuts off introspection and authentic interaction.

Recall that Heidegger claims, “the more profound the boredom, the more silent, the less public, the quieter, the more inconspicuous and wide-ranging it is” (2001, p. 143). So, what makes the loneliness that only smartphones make possible, profound? While existential loneliness is a subjective psychological state in which we are acutely aware of our loneliness and experience pain that drives us to reconnect, in profound loneliness, our loneliness is concealed from us, hidden from view. We no longer fight our loneliness precisely because we are *unaware*. Like profound boredom, this loneliness is “inconspicuous and wide-ranging.” This feigned connectivity is one of the essential aspects of *profound* loneliness, where we feel constantly connected to others, yet this contrived connection we have on these devices hides our sense of abandon-ness. As Turkle notes, “We have found ways of spending more time with friends and family in which we hardly give them any attention at all” (2013, p. 164). We are abandoned while sitting next to another person, abandoned while actively communicating with them. These devices provide us with a “multiplicity of worlds” that set us apart: we can be together, yet “always somewhere else as well” (Turkle, 2013, p. 152).

Profound loneliness is closely connected to and made possible in part by its relationship to profound boredom *with* things. Google and smartphones have rewired our brains to want constant stimulation and a steady flow of new and exciting information (Carr, 2012, p. 117). If we don’t get that onslaught of information, that dopamine hit, we get bored. We quickly look for something that will dull the boredom. Deep connection and introspection require a different kind of mindset altogether, an attentive mind with a willingness for a long obedience in the same direction. Boredom drives distraction, distraction fed by the smartphone, distraction that alienates us from ourselves and each other and leads to profound loneliness. Profound loneliness, in turn, alienates us from ourselves. “In profound boredom, we are bored by everything, including ourselves, and nothing in the world matters” (Dahlstrom, 2013, p. 41). In profound loneliness, we are *isolated* from everything, including ourselves. For Marx, capitalism and the modern forces of production caused several forms of alienation, one being from ourselves, that is, from our own nature as creative beings (1978, p. 77). While creativity is certainly a fundamental aspect of human nature, I think Taylor is right that authenticity is a uniquely modern but no less fundamental aspect. Smartphones make us communicating machines, but machines without an authentic voice. Profound loneliness alienates us from ourselves because it cuts us off from both the deep reflection and the dialogical connection necessary for self-discovery.

**VI. Conclusion**

I titled this essay “The Moral Threat of Profound Loneliness,” and early on alluded to Durkheim’s understanding of morality as the practices and norms that bind us together. Profound loneliness does just the opposite. Durkheim, of course, was trained as a philosopher but helped found the field of sociology, so he is more interested in how morality develops and functions. For Durkheim, the morality that binds must first “emerge from relations which are established among people when they associate; so it reflects the life of the group or groups concerned” (Durkheim, 1973, p. 86; fp. 73; cited in Hall, 1991, p. 98.). It’s hard to argue that Marx was onto something about technology: it changes us. It changes how we think, act, and relate to each other. Technology might even re-wire our brains. And surely the profound loneliness that both reveals and conceals alters our relationships. So, if the smartphone changes how we relate to one another, and associations are the basis of the moral order, what kind of new moral order might emerge? The recent data is not hopeful. But I think that the profound loneliness we sometimes experience also reminds us of an even deeper human truth – our desire to connect. Our deepest, most authentic selves are discovered in dialogue and community with others, dialogical exchange that needs to happen face-to-face. And recent empirical studies suggest that this dialogical exchange does not have to happen between intimate friends; even more mundane conversations between people with weak ties can change our outlook and increase our happiness (Sandstrom and Dunn, 2014). Surely Marx was wrong that human nature is so malleable that technology *completely* determines our social being. We can resist even the most coercive social forces. So, in the spirit of Lukas Nelson (the son of Willie) who tells us to turn off the news and build a garden, perhaps we should put down the phone and start a conversation. Our moral lives just might depend on it.

**Notes**

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1. “[B]ecause it relates to character, called in Greek *ēthos*, while we usually term that part of philosophy ‘the study of character,’ but the suitable course is to add to the Latin language by giving this subject the name of ‘moral science’” (Cicero, *de Fato* I.1). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “These types of conduct or thought are not only external to the individual but are, moreover, endowed with coercive power, by virtue of which they impose themselves upon him. Independent of his individual will.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. This idea is indebted to Turkle (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. While some argue that the slothful are punished among the sullen in Circle 5, I follow Mark Musa (2002) in counting them among the uncommitted. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Durkheim claims that egoistic suicide springs from “society's insufficient presence in individuals…. In egoistic suicide it is deficient in truly collective activity, thus depriving the latter of object and meaning” (2010b, p. 132). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)