

Selves beyond the skin: Watsuji, “betweenness”, and self-loss in solitary confinement and dementia

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Abstract

I develop Tetsurō Watsuji’s relational model of the self as “betweenness”. I argue that Watsuji’s view receives support from two case studies: solitary confinement and dementia. Both clarify the constitutive interdependence between the self and the social and material contexts of “betweenness” that define its lifeworld. They do so by providing powerful examples of what happens when the support and regulative grounding of this lifeworld is restricted or taken away. I argue further that Watsuji’s view helps see the other side of this deprivation, how reconstructing aspects of betweenness is, at the same time, a reconstruction of the self. I conclude by briefly indicating further consequences of this view.

Introduction

A central concept within the Japanese Kyoto School of philosophy is *basho* (“place”). For Kitarō Nishida, founder of the Kyoto School, “place” is the enveloping context in which subjects are non-dually integrated with their world. It encompasses relational dynamics from which dichotomies like self/other and subject/object arise. Other Kyoto School figures like Tetsurō Watsuji and Shizuteru Ueda develop variations of this idea. One of Watsuji’s most important contributions is to link his analysis of place — or to use his favored terms, *fūdo* (“geocultural environment”) and *aidagara* (“betweenness”) — with the body (Watsuji 1988, 1961). For Watsuji, the different places and relationships (i.e., forms of betweenness) in which we live, move, and connect with others not only furnish resources we need for everyday life. They shape how we experience ourselves and live through our bodies-in-relation to the world and others.

I here explore this idea and the relational ontology of the self that emerges from it. Watsuji does not deny that something answering to the term “self” exists. What he does reject is a strong *individualistic* picture that sees selves as reducible to basic, and relatively fixed, structures or features of consciousness: reason, memory, the first-person perspective, pre-reflective self-awareness, etc. For Watsuji, the self is a shifting network of relations (Johnson, 2016; Kalmanson, 2010; McCarthy, 1998; Odin, 1992), Selves-as-betweenness are dynamic, changeable, and *ultimately social all the way down*, constitutively shaped by and dependent upon the changing contexts of betweenness that define their lifeworld. In this way, for Watsuji, selves emerge from life beyond the skin.¹

¹ As we will see, Watsuji is primarily concerned with the *bodily* nature of the self. More on this as we proceed.

However, rather than focusing on positive aspects of this self-world interdependence, I consider ways this interdependence can *go missing* — cases where opportunities to live outside our skin are dramatically disrupted or restricted. I look at case studies in what Serena Parekh (2016) terms “ontological deprivation”: different ways individuals become situated outside of “the ground from which one can engage meaningfully with others and with the world that is shared in common” (ibid., p. 91). This deprivation can take many forms. But Watsuji doesn’t spend much time considering it. His focus is how a relational ontology might generate a renewed sense of appreciation for the many ties that collectively bind us to others and the wider world (Johnson 2019; Kalmanson, 2010; Sevilla, 2016; Shuttleworth, 2020). He emphasizes the “light side” of betweenness, as we might put it.

I argue that Watsuji can do useful work in the other direction. By considering the “dark side” of betweenness — ways selves are *deprived* of relational contexts they need to maintain their orientation and sense of agency in the world — we not only find additional support for Watsuji’s ontology of the self. We see how Watsuji’s view remains relevant to a range of contemporary issues and applications. I begin with some background before arguing that Watsuji’s view receives support from two case studies: solitary confinement and dementia. Both clarify the constitutive interdependence between the self and the social and material contexts of betweenness that define its lifeworld. They provide powerful examples of what happens when the support and regulative grounding of this lifeworld is restricted or taken away. I argue further that Watsuji’s view also helps us see the other side of deprivation, how *reconstructing* aspects of betweenness is, at the same time, a reconstruction of the relational self. I conclude by briefly indicating further consequences of this view.

Bodies, selves, and (social) space

Perhaps Watsuji's most enduring contribution is his rich phenomenological analysis of bodies, space, and material culture (Mayeda, 2006).² This last category includes the tools, technologies, and other artifacts — and the customs and practices that are part of their use — within our lifeworld. Other phenomenologists like Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty are also concerned with space. Like Watsuji, they argue that as embodied subjects, we not only take up space, we also *live* it. We have an implicit proprioceptive and kinesthetic sense of where our bodies are in space and what sort of things our bodies can do given the layout of the spaces around us. And as we move through everyday life, our bodies fluidly adapt and extend themselves into different spaces.³ We shape homes, workspaces, schools, restaurants, gyms, spaces of worship, clubs, pubs, medical offices, etc. to fit our bodies and support — or in some cases limit — their capacities for movement, action, connection, and expression.

In this way, lived space — in contrast to the physical space of tables, rocks, and trees — “is not so much the essential quality of a physical body as it is the manner in which a subject operates” (Watsuji, 1996, pp. 170–171). It is tied to our agency. However, as David W. Johnson observes, Watsuji departs from other phenomenological analyses of space with his insistence that “the existential character of subjective space is disclosed first and foremost [...] in the relation between self and another, and so in the predominantly *subjective* rather than objective significance of the distances between practical subjects” (Johnson, 2019, p. 124). As Watsuji

² Watsuji also develops a nuanced phenomenological analysis of temporality by engaging with phenomenologists like Husserl and Heidegger. However, he was one of the first readers and critics of Heidegger's *Being and Time* — Watsuji travelled throughout Europe in 1927-28 — and develops his picture of the spatial self largely in response to what he sees as Heidegger's over-emphasis on *Dasein*'s temporality at the expense of *social space* (Mayeda 2006).

³ Although everyday spaces are not value-free. Authors like Sarah Ahmed (2006) and Arseli Dokumaci (2023) remind us that some bodies are more readily accommodated than others (e.g., queer bodies, non-white bodies, disabled or “crip” bodies, etc.). More on this later.

puts it, the lived space of embodied subjects is fundamentally *intersubjective*, “the betweenness itself of subjective human beings” (Watsuji, 1996, p. 157).

To see what Watsuji means, consider one of his favorite examples: early infant-caregiver interactions. Within these interactions, infants experience and negotiate lived *intersubjective* space before they understand physical space. This is because “a [carer’s] body and [their] baby’s are somehow connected as though one. To contend that there is no such connection between them, because the link connecting them is not an actual cell is valid for physiological bodies but *has nothing to do with subjective bodies*” (ibid., 62, my emphasis). Caregivers manipulate this shared space by using touch and gentle movements to prompt sucking responses and regulate infants’ attention and emotions; and infants, in turn, play a participatory role by responding to these movements, prompting further responses from caregivers. Together, both realize a shared attentional and affective convergence (Krueger, 2013a). Infants learn about themselves, their bodies, and their spatial capacities by co-constructing the timing, rhythm, attentional structure, and qualitative character of these interactions — crucially, Watsuji argues, *before* they understand objective space, or even the practical “equipmental” space Heidegger is primarily concerned with. Johnson helpfully summarizes Watsuji’s view here: “Watsuji’s contention is that this (inter)subjective space is more primary than the existential spatiality opened up by the equipmental and involvement wholes that ground Dasein’s comportment and activities” (Johnson, 2019, p. 125).

An important consequence is that lived space is *constructed* and *manipulated*. It is “the manner in which multiple subjects are related to one another. It is not a uniform extendedness, but a dialectical one, in which relations such as “far and near, wide and narrow” are mutually transformed into one another” (Watsuji, 1996, p. 157). This characterization of space leads to a

particularly trenchant way of thinking about bodily selves and betweenness in-step with some current discussions. I turn to this view now.

Bodies in betweenness and betweenness in bodies

The previous observations are at the heart of Watsuji's core phenomenological concept of *aidagara* ("betweenness"). "Betweenness" captures the many relations that generate forms of bodily selfhood (Johnson, 2016; Krueger, 2013b; McCarthy, 2010, 2011). It's also at the root of Watsuji's ethics and social ontology (Shields, 2009). "Betweenness" is a rich concept that is difficult to summarize concisely. Nevertheless, we can build on the previous section and say that for Watsuji, "betweenness" refers to ways that human reality is organized by dimensions and intensities of *spatiality* — spaces of community, connection, and interactive potential (Carter, 2013, p. 35). Again, this is more than the trivial observation that bodies take up space like tables and trees. They *live* it. Lived space is fundamental to our experience of self and world, including the biological, sociocultural, and material environments that comprise it: "I regard this subjective spatiality as the essential characteristic of human beings. Without it, the systematic relationships between personalities could not be understood" (Watsuji 1996, p. 157).

Consider another of Watsuji's favorite examples: culture. Culture is the materialization of betweenness. It is a collective effort to establish institutions, practices, artifacts, and norms for managing the flow and form of information, communication, and behavior. Within everyday contexts — religious, educational, political, artistic, legal, sporting, familial, etc. — these things craft modes of betweenness. Watsuji uses communication and transportation as examples. Mailboxes, cell towers, broadband lines, mobile phones, cars and roads, trains and railroad tracks, airplanes and airports, etc. all have physical properties. They extend through space. But

their real transformative power doesn't just flow from their *physical* spatiality but instead from the way they enlarge and expand our *subjective spatiality*. They create qualitatively new forms of betweenness, new ways of being spatially connected.

For example, with the tap of a screen or a voice prompt, smartphones and chat apps erode geographical distances by opening possibilities for communication and connection in shared online spaces (Osler, 2021; Osler & Krueger, 2022). Similar points hold for transportation technologies: “the intensity of social connections is given expression to by the intensity of railway lines, as well as by the frequency of trains” (Watsuji 1996, p. 162). In this way, communication and transportation technologies manipulate our sense of subjective spatiality by opening pathways for intimacy and connection – betweenness – that would not exist without their presence. These observations lead Watsuji to argue that “[a]ll expressions that indicate the interconnection of acts of human beings — for example, *intercourse, fellowship, transportation, communication* — can be understood only with a subjective spatiality of this sort” (ibid., p. 157).

More pertinent to present concerns is Watsuji's further argument that betweenness exists *within us*, central to the internal dynamics of our embodied agency. Watsuji develops at least two ways of thinking about this idea. The first can be understood by a remark he makes early in *Rinrigaku*. Watsuji says that betweenness “implies a living and dynamic betweenness, as a subjective interconnection of acts” (Watsuji 1996, p. 18). Two things are worth noting. First, betweenness is linked with *subjectivity*, our first-person perspective. Second, betweenness is connected to our *embodied agency*. It is something we play an active role in creating and sustaining as we move through the world and do things with others.

In developing his idea, Watsuji constructs a careful phenomenological analysis of the “dialectical unity”, as he puts it, of the bodily self. To be an embodied self is to concretely

realize betweenness within the “dual structure” of the body (Watsuji, 1996, p. 19). For Watsuji, this simply means that we are simultaneously objects *and* subjects.⁴ On one hand, bodies have properties like size, shape, color, texture, and weight. They are objects, “an organism of the sort that physiology expounds” (ibid., p. 59). But our embodiment is not exhausted by our physiology. We *live* our bodies from the inside. Our body is the subjective medium through which we engage with the world and others (ibid., p.65). For Watsuji, to be an embodied self is therefore to realize the “dialectical unity” of this space between objectivity and subjectivity. We are neither wholly one nor the other but both at the same time.

Importantly for Watsuji, this internal form of betweenness does not emerge independently of the external forms considered previously. The two are interwoven and shape one another. Watsuji is therefore keen to emphasize that neither are static nor fixed forms of spatiality. Rather, by creating spaces, we are at the same time *creating selves*. We fashion spaces that determine what bodies that inhabit them do, and how these bodies experience, orient, and interpret themselves from the inside *as bodily selves* when they move through them.

Consider how different spaces within everyday life support distinct forms of bodily expression, orientation, and connection: from classrooms, night shelters, hospitals, and sporting arenas to online video chats, mosques, queer clubs, military barracks, and political rallies. Within these spaces, our embodied subjectivity *extends into and takes shape* within their distinctive contours (Ahmed, 2006; Krueger, 2023). Watsuji’s “dialectical” approach highlights that a full picture of how bodies are constituted *as the kinds of bodies they are* will therefore reflect not just their physical properties but also the way they (subjectively) extend themselves into different

⁴ Here Watsuji follows – and anticipates, since he was writing before figures like Merleau-Ponty and Sartre – other phenomenologists when they distinguish between the body as a physical object (*körper*) and the body as subjectively lived through (*leib*).

contexts of betweenness. These dynamics are brought into sharp relief in cases where certain kinds of bodies face *resistance*. We see especially clearly how forms of embodiment such as chronically ill or disabled bodies are constituted *in action*, by the “tiny, everyday artful battles” they must enact to create more livable contexts of betweenness for themselves — often in the face of spatial configurations indifferent or hostile to their needs (Dokumaci 2023, p. 14).

In sum, for Watsuji, a phenomenological analysis of “betweenness” shows us that in creating shared spaces we are, at the same time, creating bodily selves. As we’ll see later, this can also include creating spaces that work *against* certain bodies in specific ways.

Consciousness, betweenness, and the deep structure of intentionality

The previous discussion considered one way Watsuji argues that betweenness is internal to the self, central to the experiential dynamics of our embodied agency. However, Watsuji has an even stronger way to argue for the link between external and internal forms of betweenness. Betweenness, he argues further, reaches down into and shapes not just the character of our embodied agency but also the deep structure of consciousness and intentionality. This is the idea that both the character and content of our intentional acts, which determine how the world and things in it show up as objects of experience, are shaped and regulated by our sociomaterial *milieu*, or different contexts of betweenness. So, we cannot understand consciousness — what it is, how it’s formed and functions — without considering its constitutive relation with betweenness.

I cannot do justice to Watsuji’s arguments here (see Krueger 2022). I will instead provide an overview of his main claims before putting them to work in a discussion of self-loss in solitary confinement and dementia. To begin with some background, within the

phenomenological tradition, “intentionality” refers to the way that consciousness can be *about* things, the way it can be directed toward objects both internal (mental images, memories, fictional objects) and external (things, relations, and events in the world). These intentional objects provide *content* for different mental states. And since intentionality is a central feature of consciousness — it is the activity by which our lifeworld shows up with its distinctive meaning and salience — the core task of phenomenology is therefore to develop a careful analysis of the structure of our intentional relations with the world and things in it (Krueger 2018).

Watsuji agrees. But he departs from phenomenologists like Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty in some important ways. Like these phenomenologists, he argues that subjects play an active role in constituting *how* objects appear to consciousness as, say, an object of perception, belief, memory, desire, etc. These “hows” determine their salience and character. For example, I can see an apple as a piece of fruit, something that affords eating or throwing, or as part of my colleague’s lunch; I can believe it to be a Gala apple, judge that it’s overripe, wish it were less so, etc. These intentional acts stretch out to the apple in the world and not some internal representation (Zahavi, 2008). But intentional objects are never present, experientially, in a value-free way. These different “hows”, or modes of presentation, reflect the constituting activity of subjects. In this way, phenomenologists argue, the character of consciousness and intentionality reveals how subjects play an active role in shaping the form and meaning of their experience in conjunction with their lifeworld.

Again, Watsuji agrees. But he departs from other phenomenologists by advancing a radically social model of intentionality. His core idea is that *all* forms of intentionality depend upon — insofar as they are regulated and sustained by — our interactions with others, the dynamics of betweenness. As he puts it: “No matter which aspect of consciousness we may lay

hold of, none can be said to be essentially independent. The independent consciousness of I is acquired only when isolated from any connection at all with other consciousnesses” (Watsuji 1996, p. 80). He tells us elsewhere that “What is called intentional activity is nothing more than the product of abstraction that first of all excludes the relational elements from our acts, and then posits the residue as an activity of individual consciousness” (p. 34).

One strategy Watsuji uses to defend this view is to select experiences that seem to be individual experience “essentially independent” of the social world (i.e., betweenness), and then show that the intentional structure of these experiences remains irreducibly social, in that it’s regulated by “specific social forms” preexisting our individual development (ibid., p. 74). To pick just one example, consider our desires. Watsuji argues that while token episodes of desiring (e.g., a piece of cake, Belgian beer, or holiday) are uniquely ours, the character and content of the desire — how the desirous object is constituted *from within the experience of desiring* — is only intelligible against a shared “communal consciousness” in which that desire “is socially qualified or modified” (ibid., p.74). Simply put, we learn both *what* to desire and *how* to desire it from others. This includes being enculturated into developmentally basic bodily practices and habits of attention that allow us to satiate and sustain these desires. These practices and habits are what enable us to constitute intentional objects *as desirable*. They allow us to become bodily sensitive to features of our world that manifest *as worthy* of our desirous attention. And crucially, they are regulated from birth by the ongoing input of the people and spaces around us — especially caregivers who shape the development of attentional practices that bring specific parts of the world into view while occluding others and present them as worthy of desiring in the first place (Krueger 2013a; Spurrett & Cowley, 2010).

There is more to say about Watsuji's rich social view of intentionality. For now, the key point is this: intentional processes that constitute our world as a rich landscape of desire-worthy objects do not develop and unfold independently from others. Instead, they arise via phenomenological structures and embodied practices that constitutively depend upon the ongoing support and regulation of sociocultural and material contexts of betweenness. As we'll now see, when this support is compromised or somehow goes missing, we are deprived of our ability to constitute a meaningful world and maintain ourselves as bodily-spatial selves.

Ontological deprivation and self-loss in solitary confinement and dementia

I now consider two case studies: solitary confinement and dementia. These examples, I argue, are cases of what Serena Parekh terms "ontological deprivation" (Parekh 2016). Parekh develops this idea in her work on stateless people and political asylum seekers. She argues that individuals who spend long periods of time in refugee camps and other facilities don't simply lose their citizenship in a political community. They lose something fundamental to their *humanity*. They are often deprived of the resources and stability – the contexts of betweenness – needed to cultivate and maintain their bodily subjectivity.

For Parekh, ontological deprivation includes three dimensions: a loss of *identity and reduction to "bare life"* (i.e., basic maintenance of one's biological body); the *expulsion from a common humanity*, and loss of connections and possibilities that go with it; and *a loss of agency*, or ability to have one's words and actions be recognized as meaningful by others and receive uptake. Collectively, these dimensions result in a practical exclusion of stateless people from the common world. And more perniciously, their "very identities and modes of existence are defined almost entirely by their exclusion" (ibid., 83). They are made to exist in liminal spaces outside of

humanity. For these reasons, she concludes, refugee policy should be concerned with addressing the ontology of statelessness and not focus exclusively on political harms that come from loss of citizenship.

I now use this notion, along with Watsuji's phenomenology of betweenness, to examine the character of self-loss in solitary confinement and dementia. These case studies are useful here for two reasons. First, they affirm the descriptive utility of Watsuji's framework and provide support for his relational view of the self-as-betweenness. Second, they show why this view matters. Like statelessness, these examples demonstrate both the ethical and practical significance of this approach, and how and why our conceptual frameworks and self-narratives potentially have real-world significance.

Solitary confinement

Lisa Guenther has done important work on the phenomenology of solitary confinement (Guenther, 2011, 2013, 2015; see also Gallagher 2014, Smith, 2006). Guenther argues that during prolonged periods of isolation — where prisoners are confined to small cells for months or even years at a time, with few opportunities to move, connect with others, and engage with the wider world — the cumulative effects of various cognitive impairments, perceptual distortions, and affective strain lead to a breakdown of the self. Individuals are housed in small, perceptually sparse spaces. These cells are intentionally designed to restrict movement, limit interpersonal contact, and deprive individuals of novelty and stimulation. Face-to-face interaction is generally limited to guards removing handcuffs and other restraints or checking inmates' bodies for weapons and contraband.

The destructive effects of prolonged solitary confinement within these small spaces have long been known. Many prisoners describe their experience as a living death. As Jack Henry Abbott writes in his memoir of twenty-five years in prison, “Solitary confinement can alter the ontological makeup of a stone” (Abbott, 1991, p. 45). Those who observe the effects of such confinement offer similarly vivid characterizations. For instance, during the 19th century, delegates from Europe came to the United States to observe solitary confinement in American prisons. Charles Darwin reports meeting inmates who were “dead to everything but torturing anxieties and horrible despair” (quoted in Grassian, 1983, p. 1450). The author Charles Dickens offers similar descriptions and concludes that solitary confinement is a form of punishment “which no man has a right to inflict upon his fellow creature” (quoted in Guenther 2013, p. 18).

There is ample evidence that following prolonged bouts of solitary confinement, previously healthy prisoners begin to experience an erosion of the self, a pathological breakdown of attention and embodied agency. As Guenther puts it, “[t]hey see things that do not exist, and they fail to see things that do. Their sense of their own bodies — even the fundamental capacity to feel pain and distinguish their own pain from that of others — erodes to the point where they are no longer sure if they are being harmed or harming themselves” (Guenther, 2013, p. xi).

This self-erosion is made clear by looking at the cluster of psychiatric symptoms — cognitive, perceptual, and affective — inmates experience and display. For instance, many inmates have difficulty with thought, concentration, and memory. They describe confusion and amnesia, sometimes with features suggestive of *dissociation* and *depersonalization*:

I went to a stand-still psychologically once — lapse of memory. I didn’t talk for 15 days.
I couldn’t hear clearly. You can’t see — you’re blind — block everything out —

disoriented, awareness is very bad. Did someone say he's coming out of it? I think what I'm saying is true — not sure. I think I was drooling — a complete standstill (Grassian 1983, p. 1453).

Others display paranoia or exhibit shaky reality testing: “Spaced out. Hear singing, peoples’ voices — ‘Cut your wrists and go to Bridgewater and the Celtics are playing tonight.’ I doubt myself — is it real?” (ibid., p. 1453).

Perceptual and affective disturbances are also common. Prisoners hear sounds and voices and exhibit acute anxiety responses and difficulty regulating their emotions. Studies of 100 inmates in California’s Pelican Bay Supermax prison found 91% of the prisoners suffered from anxiety and nervousness; 70% “felt themselves on the verge of an emotional breakdown”; and 77% reported experiencing chronic depression (Haney, 2003). We find descriptions of perceptual disturbances like the following (Grassian 1983): “I hear sounds — guards saying, ‘They’re going to cut it [his nerve-damaged leg] off.’ I’m not sure. Did they say it or is it my imagination?”; “The cell walls start wavering; melting, everything in the cell starts wavering; everything gets darker, you feel you are losing your vision.”

There is also evidence of bodily and motor disturbances, too. As Guenther notes, “it is precisely at the level of bodily perception, sensibility and affectivity that prisoners find their relation to the world undermined (Guenther, 2013, p. 154). These bodily and motor disturbances can lead to experiences of *derealization*, a weakened capacity to constitute an experience of the world as structured and meaningful: “[At] the front of [the] cell I saw the mesh, and I was just standing there and looking out, and all of a sudden it just starts moving like it was waving” (Shalev, 2009, p. 193).

Guenther argues that these breakdowns of attention and bodily agency result from the fact that prolonged solitary confinement not only dulls the senses and impairs cognitive faculties. It also impacts the *deep structure* of the self: it “attacks the structure of intentional consciousness by impoverishing the world to which consciousness is correlated” (Guenther 2013, p.35). Inmates experience a near-total inability to live outside their skin. This restriction not only stems from a general sense of being cut off from a shared world, or even the persistent lack of embodied interpersonal contact — although both contribute to these breakdowns, too. It also flows from a disintegration of the *spatial possibilities* that are normally part of the open-ended, exploratory nature of our intentional engagement with the world and things in it.

In everyday life, we move through the world and experience things and spaces with an implicit understanding that these things and spaces are, in principle, available to others. For phenomenologists, this is the transcendental intersubjective basis for our experience of the world as real and objective. However, within solitary confinement, this intersubjective basis is *structurally undermined* (ibid., 35; see also Gallagher 2014, p. 5). And this disruption of our bodily-spatial relation to the world leads, in turn, to a gradual compression and erosion of the self. Again, Guenther puts this point powerfully when she writes that solitary confinement “exploits the most fundamental capacities of [the prisoners’] embodied existence, turning the constitutive relationality of their consciousness against themselves, using their most important power — the power of coconstituting a meaningful world — as a weapon against them” (ibid., p. 36).

To return to Parekh, we can see how these reports map directly onto her three dimensions of ontological deprivation. First, inmates experience *a loss of identity and a reduction to “bare life”*. Their basic day-to-day needs are met to sustain their biological or object-bodies. But they

have few opportunities to cultivate and extend their *subjective spatiality*, either by exploring dynamic, information-rich environments or by engaging with others outside of the short, highly scripted interactions that comprise most of their days. This is part of the spatial pathology of solitary confinement. And this contraction of lived space not only limits possibilities for free movement and bodily expression. It also limits the extent to which prisoners can both be *affected* by the world and feel *their* spontaneous responses as they negotiate the world “pushing back”. This severe loss of relationality and, crucially, *reciprocity* leads to a gradual diminution of the self-as-betweenness. As Else Christensen, in a study of solitary confinement in Denmark tells us: “The person subjected to solitary confinement risks losing her self and disappearing into a non-existence” (Christensen, 1999, p. 45; cited and trans. by Smith, 2006, p. 49).

Second, inmates experience an *expulsion from a common humanity and intersubjective possibilities*. They are cut off from the wider world, confined to very narrow modes of betweenness that lack meaningful connections with others. Abbott puts this idea concisely when he says, “I have been denied the society of others: It is simple as that” (Abbott, 1991, p. 106). Moreover, inmates are also deprived of basic *intercorporeal* contact — apart, once more, from tightly-scripted interactions that reinforce their excluded status as object-bodies lacking privacy and autonomy. And third, inmates experience a deep *loss of agency, or recognition and uptake of one’s words and actions*. They not only experience a disturbance of their bodily-spatial agency. They also recognize a lack of standing, recognition, and concern from those who control their fate, which further reinforces their feeling disconnected from the wider world. As one inmate puts it, “They don’t treat you bad, but it’s just that everything is so impersonal. It’s like dealing with automatons” (quoted in Rhodes, 2004, p. 29).

Taken together, this phenomenological interpretation of self-loss in solitary confinement supports Watsuji's relational framework of the self-as betweenness. Without the grounding and regulative support different sociomaterial aspects of betweenness provide, inmates' ability to live beyond the skin is structurally undermined. They lose their capacity to intentionally constitute a meaningful world with others — and with that, their capacity to cultivate and maintain a self.

Dementia

I now turn to ontological deprivation and self-loss in dementia. Dementia is a broad term covering a spectrum of symptoms caused by various diseases or brain injury. As such, it is a syndrome characterized by a general deterioration of cognitive function, including severe memory loss and language difficulties (Hughes, 2011). Dementia is often spoken of as a gradual dissolution or even total loss of the self — a kind of living death (Robertson, 1990). We find claims that dementia is a kind of “drifting towards the threshold of unbeing” (Kitwood & Bredin, 1992, p. 285). Others say that “what is so devastating about the relentless nature of dementia is the very splintering of the sedimented layers of Being [until] there is nothing left” (Davis, 2004, p. 375), and that the “the victim of Alzheimer's must eventually come to terms with...the complete loss of self” (Cohen & Eisdorfer, 1986, p. 22).

For the person with dementia, part of their anxiety flows from a dawning awareness that their grip on the world is slowly slipping away. Some say that they no longer feel real (Hughes, 2001, p. 86). And for partners, family members, and friends, part of *their* difficulties comes not only from watching this process unfold. It involves learning how to relate to someone who, in many ways, may slowly seem to be turning into a different person.

Dementia is instructive here for several reasons. Like solitary confinement, it provides a vivid example of how losing reliable access to the grounding and support of different forms of betweenness can lead to a kind of “self-loss” (with some caveats, explored below). However, it also differs from solitary confinement in an important way. With the latter, the ontological deprivation of extreme isolation is imposed on the individual *from the outside*. Access to betweenness is deliberately withheld as a form of punishment. Conversely, with dementia, this access may slowly begin to weaken from the inside due to the progression of the neurodegenerative disease or brain injury. Yet as we’ll see, links with betweenness can still be externally *reconstructed* and *recalibrated* — even as the disease progresses. In other words, individuals can be supported in ways that allow them to continue living beyond their skin and preserve aspects of the relational self. In this way, dementia is, to use Watsuji’s terminology, an especially powerful example of the “dialectical unity” of internal and external forms of betweenness.

One reason dementia is often thought of as a loss of self is due to presuppositions about the self. Many dementia researchers adopt what Hughes (2001, 2011) terms the “Locke-Parfit view of the person”. This Locke-Parfit view sees selves as grounded in certain psychological states (e.g., autobiographical memory) and their overlapping synchronic and diachronic connections. From this cognitivist perspective, “[w]hen we speak of persons we speak of no more than these continuing and connected psychological states” (Hughes, 2001, p. 87). So, when an individual loses the ability to form such states and establish the necessary psychological links between them — as happens with dementia — they lose the capacity to maintain a self (Basting, 2003).

Within the past few decades, however, dementia research has taken an embodied turn (Hughes, 2011; Hydén et al., 2014; Käll, 2017; Kontos, 2005; Petherbridge, 2019; Tewes, 2021). Many now look to “disentangle the self from the cognitive categories upon which it is presumed to depend, and ground it in corporeality” (Kontos & Martin, 2013, p. 290). These approaches look to ground selfhood within the *pre-reflective body*: both the body’s agency and forms of expression (e.g., habits, gestures, posture, movements, facial expressions, etc.), as well as the dynamics by which these capacities are shaped by socialization and cultural upbringing (i.e., everyday contexts of betweenness). Importantly, this perspective looks to emphasize the interrelation between self and world, the “active and acted upon nature of the body, both of which are of paramount importance for understanding embodied ways of being-in-the-world” (ibid., 291).

Proponents argue that an important consequence of this embodied perspective is that it compels us to rethink what kind of *self-loss* occurs in dementia. Even when cognitive capacities like memory, language, and reasoning decline, distinctive dynamics of the pre-reflective body remain — aspects that are part of the ongoing performance of the bodily-spatial self. As Hydén notes, from this phenomenological perspective “[i]dentity can be shown rather than told: it is by their bodily engagement, by doing certain things in a specific way, that a person shows their identity [...] as part of the ways a person is *connected to the world through practical engagement* (Hydén, 2021, p. 496 my emphasis). In short, these approaches recognize the extent to which selves are formed and sustained beyond the skin. So, while an individual with dementia may suffer severe memory loss and have difficulty speaking, many aspects of their bodily-spatial self remain intact, publicly discernible to loved ones and caregivers.

For instance, many people with dementia continue to display distinctive forms of *bodily expression*: idiosyncratic ways of gesturing, smiling, winking, or frowning; intonation and vocalizing, even in the absence of words; or within their bodily comportment and general way of carrying themselves through the world. Some maintain distinctive habits of *self-presentation*, such as pausing to freshen up their lipstick before going to dinner or, after a caregiver has secured their bib, reaching behind their neck to display a prized string of pearls. Others display distinctive patterns of *social etiquette*, such as habitually pushing in the chair after finishing a meal, or individuals — including those with severe cognitive impairments — who nonetheless say “thank you” each time a caregiver wipes food from their chin. Care home residents may soothe other distressed residents with distinctive *comforting strategies* like gently placing a hand on their forearm and singing songs that reflect their cultural heritage. Concerts and sing-a-longs provide opportunities for spontaneous *dancing* and *play*, examples of “engagements with the world and interacting with coherence, purpose and meaning” that articulate a distinctive pre-reflective bodily profile (Kontos 2004, p. 836).

The bodily-spatial self emerges and is scaffolded by things within the sociomaterial environment. For example, individuals may develop unique ways of incorporating their walker into unique styles of moving through the world, including gesturing and dancing (ibid., 839). Others extend their subjective spatiality, to use Watsuji’s language, via the performance of religious rituals and practices — many of which involve interacting with things like religious texts, prayer shawls, skullcaps, or rosary beads (Kontos, 2006). Clothing is also important; it lies at the intersection between the body and social self (Twigg & Buse, 2013). So, choosing specific styles, colors, fabrics, accessories, etc. can be an important way to maintain pre-reflective habits of bodily self-presentation (Bartlett, 2012).

But clothes are not simply outward-facing artifacts that extend one's subjective spatiality. They have *intra-bodily* significance, too. This is because “how you are socially presented, with the embedded meanings implied, can be a source of ease and calm — or its reverse” (Twigg, 2010, p. 226). If we feel confident or elegant in our clothing, these feelings will impact our bodily comportment as we engage with others. But clothes also surround and envelope the body directly; we immediately see and feel them as we move through the world. So, although someone with dementia may struggle to perceive themselves in terms of their appearance to others — a common feature of dementia as it progresses is an inability to recognize oneself in the mirror — the way clothes feel “at a direct and sensuous level” still impacts things like their comfort level, freedom, ease of habitual movements and gestures, emotional wellbeing, etc. (ibid., 227). In this way, for people with dementia, clothing is a particularly important piece of “social equipment” (ibid., 227) for expressing, preserving, and regulating the bodily-spatial self.

Importantly, these considerations are not confined to theoretical discussions of identity. They inform practical approaches to dementia care. Twigg argues that the “hard, plastic, easy wipe, easycare polyester world” (Twigg, 2010, p. 226) of traditional care homes — along with standardized modes of dress (e.g., easycare fabrics that require no ironing; trousers permanently fastened to prevent exposure) — fix the classic look of the “dementia patient”. Moreover, by prioritizing efficiency and control, this clothing and these spaces “underscore the materializing effects of institutional regimes on the body” and shape the kinds of behavior and bodily selves that emerge within them (Kontos & Martin, 2013, p. 294). However, others are exploring alternative approaches that reflect greater sensitivity to the link between bodily selves and space.

Consider Chatterji's (1998) ethnography of a Dutch nursing home. Instead of a space designed to control bodies and diminish agency, he describes a rich therapeutic space of

betweenness designed to facilitate connection, enhance memory, and foster and support various identity-constructing practices. For example, long corridors connecting different buildings are punctuated by points of interest and places to rest, giving the impression of a street. Shopping areas are designed to look like public squares, complete with streetlights and benches. Another community on the outskirts of Amsterdam called *Hogeweyk*, also known as “Dementia Village”, takes this idea even further. The community is surrounded by distinctly styled apartments and buildings, with a pedestrian boulevard running through the center. Residents can move freely, shop for supplies at the grocery store, get their hair done at the salon, or dine at restaurants — all while surrounded by caregivers who, although wearing casual clothing, monitor the residents carefully.

Recognizing the therapeutic importance of living beyond the skin, Buse and colleagues (Buse et al., 2018) argue for what they term a “materialities of care” perspective. They note that the transition from an independent self-styled environment to a nursing home — organized by design decisions, traditions, schedules, etc. largely out of residents’ control — is a major cause of loss, grief, and disorientation in elderly patients, including those with dementia. So, some forward-thinking care homes and hospices now allow residents to bring some of their own furniture and personal objects. This practice allows residents to craft familiar spaces of betweenness that help them feel more immediately at home by extending their subjective spatiality. These practices help stabilize their mood, support familiar habits, and provide access to memories, narratives, and associations that facilitate the constitution of a meaningful world and recalibrate a sense of rootedness, even as the dementia progresses.

In sum, dementia provides another useful case study of ontological deprivation and self-loss. Like solitary confinement, it maps directly onto Parekh’s three categories. But it also differs

from solitary confinement in some instructive ways, too. First, due to the progressive nature of the disease, as well as the “materializing effects of institutional regimes on the body” (Kontos and Martin 2013), people with dementia can and do experience *a loss of identity and a reduction to “bare life”*. Basic caregiving needs are met. However, within the “hard, plastic, easy wipe, easycare polyester world” of many care homes, they often have few opportunities to cultivate and extend their subjective spatiality — largely due to caregivers accepting cognitivist narratives about the self suggesting that there is increasingly “no one home”, no subjectivity left *to extend* (Hughes, 2011, p. 232).

Second, these narratives can result in people with dementia being *expelled from a common humanity*. This is not generally the result of uncaring motives or willful indifference. However, when one assumes that the self has eroded or even disappeared in dementia, this can lead to what Sabat (2006) terms “malignant positioning”: defining the person exclusively in terms of their *neuropathology, cognitive deficiency, and loss*. This positioning has practical effects. It can lead to things like their cognitive performance or behavior being interpreted exclusively in “defective” terms; overlooking how this “defective” behavior may, at least partially, result from negative evaluations and treatments by others; and failing to see how being reduced to one’s diagnosis and narratives of deficiency and loss generate a diminished sense of self-worth. As Hughes puts it, “[t]hus there is a real sense of alienation, which includes self-alienation, as the person regards him or herself as being deficient in some way, which helps create an environment in which there is nothing to bolster a person’s sense of self-esteem” (Hughes, 2011, p. 232).

Third, this expulsion from a common humanity and the malignant positioning that is part of it can, predictably, lead to a felt *loss of agency, or recognition and uptake of one’s words and*

actions. Sabat (2006, p. 290) gives the example of a person with dementia and their primary caregiver meeting with a healthcare professional and discussing the person with dementia (their cognitive deficits, treatment options, prognosis, etc.) as though they were not present. If the person later feels humiliated and expresses anger at this treatment, their anger may be labeled an example of “irrational hostility” — further deepening their sense of diminished agency and lack of recognition.

But as we’ve also seen, alternative self-narratives — relational models of the bodily-spatial self and its dependence on contexts of betweenness — can instead inform strategies that help individuals *counteract* some of the ontological deprivation they experience in dementia. Again, there are many ways the social environment can both impoverish as well as enrich the self (Hughes 2011, 231). As Sabat reminds us, “accurate positioning would require healthy others to take into account the effects not only of the disease itself, and the afflicted person’s reactions to the effects of the disease, but also the effect of the social environment on the person’s behavior (Sabat, 2001, p. 111). So, unlike solitary confinement, which is an intentional *imposition* of ontological deprivation onto prisoners, creative approaches to dementia care can help individuals reconstruct and recalibrate connections to their social and material environments and find new ways of living beyond the skin.

Conclusion

I have argued that looking at the “dark side” of Watsuji’s betweenness — ways selves are deprived of or lose access to relational contexts needed to maintain their orientation and sense of bodily agency in the world — we not only find additional support for Watsuji’s ontology of the self. We also see how Watsuji’s view is relevant to some contemporary issues and applications. I

put Watsuji's framework to work in the context of solitary confinement and dementia. Serena Parekh's important work on "ontological deprivation" provided additional support. I argued that both helped further clarify the interdependence between the self and the rich social and material contexts of betweenness that define its lifeworld. They do so by providing powerful examples of what happens when the support and regulative grounding of this lifeworld is restricted or taken away. In the case of solitary confinement, we saw that extreme isolation is not simply a restriction of one's freedom. It can lead to a systematic dismantling and destruction of the self. Watsuji's framework therefore provides additional support for the idea that "[s]olitary confinement morally degrades human dignity by literally degrading (if not destroying) the human self" in its embodied, situated, and affective dimensions (Gallagher, 2014, p. 7).

Yet this need not be a purely negative discussion. As we saw in the case of dementia, Watsuji's view — working in tandem with Parekh — also helps us see the other side of deprivation, how *reconstructing* aspects of betweenness is, at the same time, a reconstruction of the self. This shift of perspective has practical import. Rather than focus on narratives of *deficit*, *deficiency*, and *loss* — which may contribute to the alienation and suffering of individuals with dementia — Watsuji can contribute to alternative emerging narratives of "relational citizenship" in dementia treatment.

Narratives of relational citizenship are "premised on the importance of interdependence, reciprocity, and the support of persons with dementia as active partners in their own care" (Kontos et al., 2017, pp. 182–183). These approaches emphasize that the capacities, habits, expressive dynamics, and socio-cultural dispositions of bodies — supported and guided by their everyday contexts of betweenness — are "central to self-expression, interdependence, and the reciprocal nature of engagement" (ibid., p. 183). These aspects of the bodily-spatial self therefore

can and should be supported in dementia care. Adopting this perspective is not to minimize the challenges and suffering that often accompany dementia, both for the individual and their caregivers. But it does motivate the exploration of “new techniques and interventions for the promotion of selfhood in dementia, based upon more holistic definitions of what care is” (Jenkins, 2014, p. 134). A relational citizenship approach may also empower those in an immediate position of support, such as family members, to see their role in preserving the individuals’ identity and feel more connected to them as they together negotiate this phase of life. As an ethicist, Watsuji would surely endorse applied approaches that use his ideas to cultivate greater compassion and care.

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