Loneliness and the emotional experience of absence

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Abstract

In this paper, we develop an analysis of the structure and content of loneliness. We argue that this is an *emotion of absence* – an affective state in which certain social goods are regarded as out of reach for the subject of experience. By surveying the range of social goods that appear to be missing from the lonely person's perspective, we see what it is that can make this emotional condition so subjectively awful for those who undergo it, including the profound sense of being unable to realise oneself, in collaboration with others.

Introduction

Many of our emotions arise in response to those external objects or events that bear significance for our projects and interests – our fear of a deadly snake; our anger at being insulted; the joy we feel when seeing a loved-one; and so forth. According to several mainstream theories of emotion, states such as fear, anger, and joy are intentionally directed at ordinary entities like these, whether in the form of an evaluative judgement (Nussbaum 2001; Solomon 1976) or construal (Roberts 2003); a world-oriented feeling (Goldie 2002); or as a perceptual or quasi-perceptual state (Prinz 2004). Intentional contents distinguish discrete emotions from one another and from moods, and make it the case that emotions are fitting in some situations and not in others (D'Arms & Jacobson 2000).

Some emotions, on the other hand, are responses to *absences* – for instance the surprise we experience when the car is not where we left it; our disappointment that it has not snowed overnight; or our frustration about the lack of good books at the library. And some emotions are *essentially* about what is missing, out of reach, or non-occurring. Grief, yearning, homesickness, unrequited love, and nostalgia, for example, are forms of (often painful) awareness of the absence of some object, person, or feature.[1] Hope and anticipation are typically directed at events that have not yet occurred, or which may never occur.[2] While the sensory perception of absence has received sustained attention in recent philosophical literature (e.g. Soteriou 2011; Farennikova 2013; Cavedon-Taylor 2017), the affective experience of absence has not.[3] What is it for an emotion to be directed at the missing, the not-there, the didn't-happen?

In this paper, we give an analysis of loneliness as an emotion that essentially concerns absence.[4] To anticipate, we hold that the experience of loneliness involves the feeling that certain social goods are missing and out of reach, either temporarily or permanently. The aims of the paper are twofold. Firstly, by highlighting the range and depth of the social goods that may be experienced as absent in this complex emotion, we gain a fuller understanding of the nature of loneliness and of the suffering that it can involve. Secondly, by using loneliness as an exemplar we can more clearly see

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[1] For Gustafson (1989), for example, grief is essentially an emotional awareness of the *loss* of a loved-one. For Fuchs (2018), grief is a gradual adjustment to this loss, during which the absent loved-one may retain an "as-if presence" in experience.

[2] See, for example, Martin (2011) for discussion of hopes that concern outcomes that have not yet happened.

[3] But see Roberts (2019) for an account of the experience of being emotionally unmoved by a situation; and Farennikova (2018) for an analysis of the evaluative perception of absence and examples of affective responses to absences. Cochrane's (2018) control theory of emotions permits that *losses* may be salient in emotional experience, and that the subject's capacity to restore those losses may make the difference between one emotion and another (p110).

[4] Despite the fact that loneliness is a near-universal experience, and is discussed extensively in literature, poetry, and religious texts, as well as empirical disciplines like sociology, psychology, and neuroscience, it has received surprisingly little attention from philosophers of emotion. Two exceptions in recent philosophy are Mijuskovic (2012), who treats loneliness as a universal, existential form of alienation from others; and Svendsen (2017), whose wide-ranging treatment of loneliness includes its historical, political, and sociological dimensions.

how emotions that take absences as their objects are structured. We begin in section one by introducing some examples of what we call emotions of absence and unpacking their general characteristics. In section two, we give an articulation of the content and character of the emotion of loneliness. In section three, we consider an objection to the account that arises from the experience of chronic loneliness and offer a response. In section four, we summarise our conclusions.

1. Emotions of absence

In the ordinary course of things, we face a great many absences that might come to our attention. Our local surroundings have one set of material constituents and qualities and not another; some objects and places are nearby and others are out of sight; our past contains the things we did and not the things we did not do; we ourselves have certain characteristics, both physical and mental, and lack others; and so on. Not all such absences enter our awareness, however; indeed, we are surely indifferent to most of them. What does it take, then, for an absence to become emotionally salient for an agent?

In this section, we introduce a family of emotions of absence that have a two-part structure that we take to be characteristic of affective states of this class.[5] The first element of each state is a pro-attitude towards some absent thing or quality; such as a desire for it, or an attitude of admiration, lust, or appreciation. The second element is a complex awareness that the absent thing cannot be made to be present; it cannot easily be achieved, generated, or brought about. This awareness has a package of cognitive, behavioural, and phenomenological symptoms, just as ordinary emotions do. The agent's emotional awareness that some desired good is out of reach may show

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[5] We focus here on absences of things towards which the subject has a *pro*-attitude, but leave open the possibility that there are emotions that track the absence of things that are negatively construed; such as the relief that something feared did not happen.

up in evaluative judgement, in embodied dispositions to act, and in the qualitative character of her subjective condition.[6]

Consider the experience of homesickness, for example. This feeling involves a kind of longing – a desire for the comfort and familiarity of home – coupled with an awareness of how difficult it would be to realise this end. What is emotionally salient to the homesick individual is the *distance* that lies between her and home; whether this be literal, geographical distance, or a distance that concerns the physical or psychological labour that going home would require. The same two-part structure is evident in unrequited love, where a yearning for a romantic connection runs up against the recognition that this is not within one's grasp.[7] Unrequited love feels different from reciprocated love - at its core is the painful awareness that the object of your affection does not feel the same way about you, and that you are powerless to change this. The salient absence in this case is not of the person you love *per se*, but of loving attitudes and behaviour on their part; these are what you covet and experience as missing. Envy, too, can involve a similar tension, when it comprises a desire for some perceived good plus an awareness that you cannot have it. Although this latter aspect is perhaps inessential to the experience of envy, many of its most vivid manifestations do involve not only the pro-attitude, but a painful sense that its object is out of reach.[8] And in many feelings of nostalgia, there is a sense that what one fondly remembers is long gone and cannot be recovered – "the very *irretrievability* of the past is salient in the

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[6] Philosophers who have sought to characterise the essential nature of emotion have tended to privilege one or other of these symptoms – e.g. appraisal theories (e.g. Lazarus 1991); embodied theories (e.g. James 1884; Prinz 2004); feeling theories (e.g. Whiting 2011). Rather than enter this debate, we will remain neutral on the question of which of these features, if any, is necessary for an emotion to occur, and will treat emotions as multi-faceted psychological phenomena.

[7] Kolodny (2003: 171) describes unrequited love as an unfulfilled desire – or a "futile pining" – for a relationship with another. For an extended discussion of the nature and value of unrequited love, see Protasi (2016a).

[8] See Protasi (2016b: 539) on how envy can vary with the "*perceived obtainability of the good*" that is envied. "Inert envy is the result of being focused on the good but believing oneself to be incapable of getting the good for herself. Since she perceives (correctly) the good as unobtainable, the motivation to improve her situation is frustrated.", p541.

experience" (Howard, 2012: 641, original emphasis).[9] Lastly, feelings of shyness and social anxiety can involve a valuing of - or a sense of obligation towards - social interaction, plus a loss of confidence or power: it seems to you to be difficult or impossible to engage in small-talk, to maintain eye contact, and to respond to those around you in an easy, comfortable manner. The absence here, then, is something that is lacking from your own repertoire of interpersonal skills.

Emotions like these each involve pro-attitudes towards some object, situation, property, or person, accompanied by an awareness of the perceived good's being somehow beyond easy reach. This 'awareness' comes in a variety of forms. In some instances, it has a largely cognitive character. In nostalgia, for example, the irrecoverable nature of the past is presented most vividly in thought or judgement; which is why we tend to think of nostalgia as being an intellectual emotion.[10] In other cases, the agent has a more significantly embodied, visceral awareness of how difficult it would be to obtain some end. The feelings of a loss of certainty and confidence that come with shyness, for instance, have a bodily character, wherein a core aspect of one's affective state is an awareness of what one cannot *do* – namely, partake easily in social conduct.[11] Elsewhere, the absence of what the agent desires, or the absence of the opportunity to pursue the good in question, is salient in perceptual experience. Part of the phenomenology of shyness, for instance, is that people look unreceptive or intimidating – their faces, body language, and so on do not solicit friendly engagement (part of feeling comfortable in a social situation, in contrast, is witnessing how others

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[9] But see Sweeney (forthcoming) for a denial of Howard's irretrievability thesis.

[10] Although nostalgia can harbour a bodily-affective component, too, such as when one feels a faint stirring, or is gripped by a more pronounced ache or yearning, for some past state of affairs.

[11] Compare this to Havi Carel's (2013) account of *bodily doubt* – the debilitating loss of bodily conviction that comes with chronic pain or illness. One who suffers bodily doubt lacks certainty in actions of a physical and practical kind, and the world is transformed into a space of obstacles, tiring distances, and once-accessible affordances (e.g., stairs or hills that one used to easily climb) that are no longer within one's reach. Feelings of shyness can be understood as a form of social doubt: a loss of confidence in oneself as a social agent, and in one's abilities to smoothly act on a landscape of social affordances (e.g., smiles, friendly gestures, invitations to continue the conversation, etc.).

respond with warmth and attentiveness). In most cases, the subject's emotional awareness will have many or all of these psychological facets. One who endures unrequited love, for instance, may undergo a bittersweet process of evaluative appraisal, in which the object of affection is construed very positively, while the impossibility of romance is judged to be unbearable; bodily feelings of turmoil or anguish; and a sense of frustration or helplessness. The intensity of the emotion is, in each case, determined by how strongly the agent cares about the missing good. Mild or fleeting envy, say, comes about when I have a passing desire for something you possess; while a more pressing and encompassing form of this emotion will arise when I crave that thing with greater urgency.

Emotions that concern what is absent and out of reach can, like other familiar affective episodes, give rise to additional psychological effects. A subject may be caused to feel daunted or de-motivated, for example, by the realisation that her goals will take great effort to achieve. Her plans for the future may be reconfigured, and her ambitions downgraded, when she suffers a loss of confidence in her own abilities. She may revise her sense of self-worth and rethink her relationships with others and her place in the world. And her attentional resources might be drawn, in thought and perception, to the object of her desire and to strategies to attain it. In sum, an individual's awareness of the absence and unattainability of the things she desires, and the impact that this has upon her mental life – her feelings, judgements, and behavioural tendencies - can have complex emotional significance.

Finally for this section, notice how first-person reports from phenomenological psychopathology can help further clarify the character of these kinds of experiences. In depressive episodes, for instance, individuals sometimes retain a sense of what it is like to connect with others but nevertheless feel unable to do so. One no longer feels drawn into interpersonal situations, or capable of smoothly adopting the embodied capacities needed to successfully negotiate everyday interactions. Depressed

individuals often describe not just an absence of interpersonal connection but also the *feeling* of absence, a felt need for something both present and, simultaneously, out of reach (Ratcliffe 2015: 219). Much of the pain of depression "arises out of the recognition that what might make me feel better—human connection—seems impossible in the midst of a paralyzing episode of depression" (Karp 1996: 16).

2. Loneliness

Before turning to how this two-part emotional structure is exhibited in loneliness and examining the content of the lonely person's pro-attitudes, two sets of preliminary observations will be made. First, a note on terminology. "Lonely" is an adjective that can pick out either a subjective or an objective condition: it is possible for a person to live an objectively lonely existence – by which is meant a life that is unusually short on social contact – without thereby experiencing the undesirable emotional state of loneliness that is the focus of the current discussion. When construed as a subjective phenomenon, we take it that loneliness, like many emotions that endure over time such as romantic love, guilt, or grief, is a dispositional state that has occurrent manifestations. One can *be lonely*, that is, over a long period even though one does not undergo conscious feelings of loneliness at each and every moment. To be lonely in this sense is to be disposed to have experiences of the kind to be analysed in what follows – to have a tendency towards bouts or pangs of loneliness that possess the complex structure outlined below.[12]

Second, we briefly rehearse the variety of circumstances that may give rise to feelings of loneliness, and to which any analysis of this emotion must do justice.[13] A person can feel lonely, most obviously, when she finds herself substantially detached from

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[12] For a detailed taxonomy of affective states, see Deonna & Teroni (2009, 2012).

[13] Svendsen (2017, chapter 3) and Ben Ze'ev (2000: 470) make similar observations about the diversity of situations in which loneliness may occur.

other people; for example when she is geographically secluded, or unable to leave her home for a long period. Loneliness can be a response to isolation from particular persons, such as one's family or one's accustomed social circle, or from a populace at large, when one feels more generally alienated or misunderstood. A person can be lonely even while they are surrounded by others – in a crowded city, say, or in the workplace. And there are many kinds of individual interpersonal relationship in which one might participate whilst at the same time feeling profoundly lonely, such as those involved in caring for small children or for a patient with dementia. These commonplace facts support the intuitive idea that what matters in loneliness is the absence not of human interaction simpliciter, but of distinctive kinds of social connection. Purely professional dealings; encounters that have a very formal structure; or exchanges that are short-lived and impersonal all seem to offer little respite from loneliness.

We propose that what the lonely person fundamentally cares about is the unattainability of certain richer social goods, such as companionship; moral support; physical contact and affection; sympathy; trust; romance; friendship; and the opportunity to act and interact – and so to flourish – as a social agent.[14] This spectrum of goods underpins, reinforces, and sustains many of our most valued human relationships, and so unpacking them in detail enables us to see what is at stake in loneliness; why this emotion can bear such significance for a person's wellbeing. Although many lonely episodes involve a relatively fleeting, sometimes inconsequential yearning for the everyday rewards of social transaction, there are deeper interpersonal goods at issue here too. Being intellectually and emotionally supported by others; receiving reassurance, validation, and love; and being able to

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[14] As we will see in more detail in section 2.2 below, this enables us to distinguish between a person who is lonely and one who is *solitary*: the latter is one for whom social goods like these do not hold so much allure; one who has confidence in her own independence, for instance, and does not crave the attention and involvement of others in her affairs.

express and cultivate those aspects of one's identity that have an essentially social form.

2.1. Social goods

When things are going well, our social contact with others yields many familiar benefits. Firstly, there are the everyday goods of pleasure and utility that can emerge between even quite casual acquaintances, such as light-hearted conversation, shared jokes, and practical assistance. There are those with whom you have something in common, and with whom you can enjoy a hobby or pastime together; and there are those who enliven mundane tasks like working or traveling. The primary value of these relationships comes from the small-scale ways in which they improve one's daily existence; and they do not require intimacy or investment – colleagues or neighbours can provide these goods.[15]

Closer relationships afford more substantial emotional and personal rewards. Friends and partners partake in a reciprocal "attitude of optimism about the other person's goodwill" (Jones 1996:6) – an expectation that the other will offer encouragement and support, for example, in times of hardship; will give proper thought to one's suggestions and schemes; will respect one's point of view; and will forgive one's misdemeanours.[16] Relationships like these can alleviate cognitive and affective burdens, for instance by offering a judgement-free setting in which one can vent stresses and fears, or a supportive space in which ideas can be vetted.[17] Sharing

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[15] Aristotle (*NE*: book VIII; *EE*: book VII) defines friendships of *pleasure* and *utility* in similar terms.

[16] Even in the closest friendships, this goodwill is not boundless. There is no expectation that one's friend will forgive grave moral transgressions, for instance. See Koltonski (2016) for a discussion of the idea that good friends are those who would help you move a body. For Aristotle (*NE:* book VIII), virtue-based philia – friendship that is grounded in the mutual pursuit of moral excellence – must be abandoned when one party falls short of virtue and cannot be reformed (for discussion see, e.g., McCoy 2013).

[17] See Tsai (2018) for an account of supportiveness as a virtue.

anxieties, thwarted ambitions, grudges, complaints, and so forth can help to contextualise them and keep them in proportion; and there is a therapeutic advantage to the disclosure of painful memories, guilty feelings, or destructive patterns of thought. A cognitive load, meanwhile, is lifted when solutions to problems are crystallised in dialogue with others, when your friend remembers something so you don't have to, and so on. These 'goods of friendship' further enhance one's quality of life, reducing the effort, anxiety, and frustration that can come with having to face the world on one's own. And people like these contribute to one's self-esteem – their praise (their flattery; their gratitude etc.) is adopted as a sincere expression of goodwill, and so can make one feel better about oneself and one's achievements. Similarly, the presence of those who are manifestly delighted to see you, and who take a keen interest in what you have to say - being recognised as a person of value, whose perspective is to be taken seriously - enhances this fundamental sense of self-worth.

Those to whom we are close, moreover, contribute over time to who we are, by helping to shape, refine and acknowledge our point of view.[18] The complexity and nuance of one's outlook on the world is developed in collaboration with others – those intimate associates who open one's eyes to new experiences, and whose contrasting ideas and judgements force one to defend or revise one's own tastes and opinions. The breadth and diversity of one's interests; the subtlety of one's aesthetic sensibilities; the passion with which one holds one's political convictions – all of these owe much to the company one keeps. And friends and partners improve our knowledge of ourselves, whether by holding up a 'mirror' through which we see our own qualities

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[18] They have, as Nehamas (2010: 288) has put it, "a privileged role in [the] lifelong process of self-construction"; and friendship "provides… a place where one can try, not necessarily consciously, new ways of being – of acting, feeling and thinking" (p289). For more on the relation between friendship and the self, see Cocking & Kennett (1998).

in someone else; via an explicit process of self-interpretation; or simply by way of shared experience.[19]

Lastly, social situations provide the context in which individual traits of character can be manifested; including those traits that matter deeply to the agent's conception of herself. Just as a sporting context can make possible the virtues of teamwork, and a professional context can make possible the virtues of leadership, say, so it is within an interpersonal context that particular aspects of one's personality can flourish. In company, you can be honest, vulnerable, witty, and kind in ways that are impossible on your own. With friends and family, you can be mischievous, irreverent, indiscreet, and spontaneous. With an intimate partner, you can be romantic, affectionate, passionate, and loyal. You can be a sympathetic listener; a storyteller; a giver of thoughtful gifts and wise counsel; or the life and soul of the party. Traits like these can be central to a person's idea of themselves; they are elements of one's character in which one may have a deep investment, and of which one may be justly proud. Moreover, they can give the bearer a sense of purpose – taking on a nurturing role, or the position of confidante or advisor, for example, brings responsibilities that make one feel valued and trusted.

Consider, then, what is absent from the life of a person who lacks full access to this spectrum of social goods, perhaps because she leads an unusually isolated existence. A loss of access to simple goods of pleasure and utility – having nobody to rely on for small favours, for conversation, or for company during everyday pursuits - is itself detrimental to her quality of life. A lack of social pleasures to enjoy or look forward to, a lack of physical affection, shared amusement, and carefree interaction all compound this condition. In the absence of persons with whom one can be relaxed and socially comfortable, one's exchanges with others are apt to be formal and

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[19] For the mirroring account, see Aristotle (*EE*: VII. xii. 1245a.); for discussion see, e.g., Biss (2011), Hitz (2011).

perfunctory, or worse – awkward and self-conscious. Without more intimate companionship, what is missing bears greater significance for one's self-conception and self-regard: there is nobody to endorse one's judgement, nor to offer advice, praise, or condolence; there are fewer opportunities to have one's ego boosted, as there is nobody to validate one's successes, applaud one's insight, appreciate one's warmth, or recognise one's talent. One is unable to fully express one's character – there is little room for the frivolous, the impromptu, the tongue-in-cheek; or for sympathy, compassion, and camaraderie.

2.2 Loneliness and the perceived absence of social goods

The lonely person's pro-attitudes are directed towards this spectrum of social goods. Most of us share this overarching, very human concern – we take pleasure in the company of others; invest in forming and maintaining close attachments to people; and value the bonds of trust, understanding, and intimacy that arise within loving relationships. Different individuals care more about particular aspects of interpersonal engagement than others, of course: some people value emotional intimacy, others put a premium on physical affection; some people desire intellectual stimulation, others seek laughter and the low-brow. Some people crave attention and validation, some are seeking a romantic or sexual partner, others desire direction and motivation from trusted associates. And a person's social pro-attitudes are idiosyncratic and partial: they concern specific persons and groups, and the peculiar benefits that accrue from relations with these people. I want *my* family's guidance; you hunger for *his* touch; he desires *their* reassurance. These attitudes fluctuate in intensity over time, as we grow and mature, as our luck changes, as we relocate, as we marry and have children, and so forth.

It is the absence and unattainability of goods of these sorts that become salient in the complex emotional psychology of loneliness.[20] They come to attention in world-directed cognitive attitudes and perceptual states, and in the self-directed experience of one's own body and its powers, to give the agent the felt impression that certain desirable social goods are inaccessible.

Consider for example how this experience of loneliness might manifest itself even whilst one is surrounded by other people, when one is struggling to integrate with them. A crowd can fail to perceptually afford easy, comfortable social engagement, nor to invite anything more than a formal level of social contact. For instance, others' attitudes may be regarded as disinterested and passive, showing only minimal engagement with one's attempted interventions. The body language of such people may be experienced as closed, and there may be a visible absence of social signals of goodwill and rapport, such as sustained eye-contact, smiles, and expressions of encouragement. In an unfamiliar community, one may witness social protocols that are foreign – norms of behavioural etiquette that one doesn't know how to navigate. Others may react with surprise, suspicion, or hostility to one's clumsy or uncertain attempts at ingratiation; the social environment thus appears not to be receptive to one's social overtures. One's own bodily comportment can come to conscious attention here, too. It may show up in feelings of hesitancy, timidity, or diffidence, where one finds oneself unable to formulate the right language or behaviour to initiate and maintain a connection with others. In the absence of perceived social cues, one may be aware that certain utterances (questions, jokes, conversational turns) or actions (gestures, facial expressions, touches) that form part of one's natural repertoire of friendly communication are contextually inappropriate. And one may feel a degree of

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[20] Mijuskovic (2015) holds that loneliness is a necessary, inescapable aspect of the human condition; in which case this 'unattainability' will be absolute. We do not share this pessimism. It *is* possible, we attest, to connect in meaningful ways with those in our social orbit, and to participate in the rewards afforded by these connections.

bodily awkwardness or lack of fluency while attempting to follow a community's unfamiliar social codes. Notice that these are lonely feelings that arise while one is in the company of others. What one feels is that social participation with those present is difficult or impossible to attain, and when one is systematically powerless to remedy this then one's loneliness may incorporate painful feelings of exclusion and alienation - entry into the social world is perceived as requiring considerable effort.

One's lack of access to social goods can also become salient in cognitive attitudes. For example, when one entertains happy memories of periods when those goods were abundant, and this throws their current absence into stark relief. When the sadness that one feels at the passing of those times (the best days spent with friends in adolescence, for instance) is not only a wistful sense of their irrecoverability, but a painful awareness that one will never be as happy again, the distress of loneliness goes further than ordinary nostalgia.[21] What is conspicuous is the gulf between the social goods one enjoyed in the past and those to which one has access in the present. The experience is one of a *loss* of such access; a recognition of goods that are no longer attainable. When one thinks of times to come, what becomes salient is a narrowing of the space of possible opportunities for social engagement and its benefits – the days and years ahead do not appear crowded with social occasions and rich with companionship. Instead, the future seems to offer only an impoverished and isolated path that, although perhaps punctuated by visits and phone calls, is largely devoid of interpersonal contact. A widow or widower, for example, may be forced to contemplate a future life that has lost its familiar texture and is now empty of all that was once shared with their partner.[22] The absence may be an inescapable focus of

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[21] We do not intend to suggest that the distinction between loneliness and nostalgia – or between the pains involved in each - is always clear. For example, Gotlib (2017: 183) emphasises "the kind of nostalgia [that] is grounded in deeper losses: the losses of home, of community, of culture, of language, and sometimes of self... a kind of sadness that can be damaging not only to moral agency, but also to one's identity". This is to align the losses experienced in nostalgia to those we have emphasised in this paper.

[22] For a detailed narrative account of grief, see Goldie (2011).

attention and rumination; something that cannot be ignored for long, and which must be continually confronted throughout the ordinary course of deliberation and decision-making.

The experience of being unable to access social goods has a self-directed component, concerning what one can and must do. One can be aware of limitations to one's dispositions and powers as a social agent, and one can be aware of the degree of responsibility one must take for oneself, in situations where one has no collaborators. As outlined above, it is a consequence of social isolation that one cannot fully be oneself, and that traits of character cannot flourish as they would in more richly interpersonal contexts. One cannot easily be affectionate, say, or vulnerable; there is little room for wit and a sense of fun to find an outlet; one's strange enthusiasms must be kept under wraps; and one may be forced to conceal or restrain the side of one's character that would otherwise find its fullest expression within a social group. This too is a condition that can come to one's attention, as a manifestation of loneliness. Firstly, one may feel constrained and inhibited during one's dealings with unfamiliar others: unable to express oneself as one would like to, for example, and bound by restrictions of decorum. One may feel that one cannot express warmth or sympathy – that it is *not one's place* to intervene in the affairs of a person one doesn't know well - and frustrated by the conventional, formulaic interactions one must undergo with strangers. More deeply, one may experience an attenuation of one's identity, akin to what one might feel at the loss of a job, for example: a lack of purpose and usefulness, a sense that one has no valuable role to play in the lives of others.[23] If there is nobody who shares one's religious, political, or moral outlook, then one might feel marginalised and under pressure not to voice and enact one's convictions. If there is nobody with whom to enjoy a favourite pastime, then one may feel unable to maintain one's identity as, say, a sports fan, choral singer, or theatregoer. Specific strands of

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[23] See Ratcliffe (2013: 602) for a discussion of this type of case.

one's social identity are experienced as invisible to others – they have no outlet - and one's loneliness concerns the ways in which isolation from like-minded individuals has left one diminished.[24]

In the absence of social relationships, moreover, one may be struck by the extent to which one must rely upon, and take responsibility for, oneself alone. In simple contexts, this can include the recognition that one must choose how to spend one's time from day to day; what to eat; how to amuse oneself; and so on. When undertaking decisions and judgements of greater importance, one acknowledges that one must determine what course of life to pursue, and which stance to take on matters of value. This is psychological labour that is often performed in collaboration with trusted associates whose judgement we trust and with whom we pursue joint projects and collective decision-making. Bereft of their encouragement and support, one might feel daunted or overwhelmed by the task ahead: that of shaping and maintaining one's perspective on the world, of regulating one's emotional condition, and of taking ownership of one's actions. With prolonged withdrawal from the social domain, one has the time and opportunity to ruminate upon one's failures, to second-guess one's choices, and to worry about things to come. One's loneliness may thus manifest itself in feelings of self-consciousness and self-doubt: a loss of confidence and certainty in one's ability to realise defining ambitions.

These considerations indicate the complexity of the multi-faceted experience of loneliness, and explain why this emotional condition can be so subjectively awful for those who suffer from it. Episodes of loneliness that involve feelings of a lack of power to express oneself, for example, or those involve a sense of exclusion and alienation from the society in which one lives; loneliness that incorporates a sense of being daunted or weighed-down by the responsibility that one must take your oneself, or a

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[24] We find a similar lesson in Svendsen (2017: 136): "Without some attachment to others, you are an inferior version of yourself, simply because central parts of yourself remain fallow".

sense that future opportunities for social pleasures are permanently closed to one; loneliness that presents the world as hostile to one's interpersonal aspirations, or as lacking opportunities for intimacy and rapport: all of these can tap into an individual's most profound concerns. They are experiences whose subjective unpleasantness is determined by how painful it is to crave certain basic human needs and see no hope of them being fulfilled.

With a positive account of how a lonely person is disposed to feel now on the table, we can see how to mark with clarity the distinction between loneliness and *solitude*, where the latter is construed as a positive or painless emotional attitude towards being apart from others – the state that is enjoyed, for example, when one takes a long walk in the countryside; when one retreats to a private space after a long day at work; or when one sneaks a break from a busy family occasion.[25] Loneliness, we have argued, requires that the subject of experience has a particular suite of pro-attitudes towards the social: that she desires, craves, or yearns for interpersonal contact and the pleasures and benefits it affords. Only then will the felt impression that these goods cannot be achieved be of emotional significance for her, and only then will her own social powerlessness and diminished identity appear as a source of distress. It is natural to think of the subject of solitude as *lacking* the relevant pro-attitudes towards social participation, whether temporarily or as an enduring trait of character. One who enjoys a brief respite from the demands of interpersonal engagement, for instance, has exhausted her reserves of goodwill and has little appetite for the company of others, at least for a while. More permanently, someone who has an overarching preference for her own company – or a systematic misanthropy – will have little need for practical or emotional input from others, and will not tend to regard interpersonal relationships as especially desirable. Likewise, someone who is supremely comfortable in their own skin, and who has no craving for social validation and reassurance, will not feel as

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[25] For discussion of possible benefits of solitude, construed as a positive form of loneliness, see Svendsen (2017, chapter 7).

though much is missing from the solitary life and may consider others to be a distraction or burden. This gives credence to Aristotle's remark that the hyper-solitary agent who is "so self-sufficient as not to need to... partake of society, is *either a beast or a god*".[26] Consider the spectrum of social goods for which a person who is never prone to feel lonely does not care: the warmth, good-humour, sympathy, and encouragement of others; the chance to express, discuss, and reflect upon deeply-held convictions; the shaping of individual and shared attitudes and the pursuit of joint projects; the giving and receiving of physical affection; and past and future times that were, or could be, enriched by the company of others. A person with so little concern for these goods that she never yearns for them when they are absent may be justly accused – *qua* beast – of a lack of humanity, compassion, or respect for others. If she is consistently indifferent to social goods because she finds them trivial in comparison to her own, loftier concerns then she has – *qua* god – transcended the everyday personal domain. A capacity for loneliness, then, is a distinctively human trait that reflects the value we place on the bonds and benefits of interpersonal relationships. It arises when our social needs are not met – when the intimacy, affection, or validation towards which we are positively oriented remains painfully out of reach, and the extent to which our individual flourishing is dependent upon the social world we inhabit is exposed.

3. Chronic loneliness

Next, it will be instructive to consider a problem case for our account of loneliness. Our model of emotions of absence entails that the subject has a pro-attitude, or combination of pro-attitudes, towards some missing or inaccessible thing; in loneliness, the various social goods we have described above. But we can well imagine a person who has been lonely for so long that she no longer feels any desire for social

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[26] *Politics*, book I part II.

interaction – she is resigned to spending her time by herself, and no craving for intimacy or yearning for lost companionship ever arises in her consciousness. In this type of case, one half of the two-part structure that we have indicated is characteristic of loneliness is missing. But we would hesitate to say that this person is not lonely, and we would be more strongly disinclined to say that her loss of socially-oriented desires has somehow *cured* her loneliness. If we are to maintain that this individual remains a victim of chronic loneliness, how can this be reconciled with the frustrated-pro-attitude account developed in this paper?

Two preliminary observations are in order before we turn to our response to this challenge. Firstly, depending on how the details of the scenario are conceived, it may be appropriate to attribute solitude rather than loneliness to the subject – that is, it may be that she has come to terms with a solitary lifestyle, and that she is broadly content with her socially isolated situation. In such a case, it is not so problematic to think that her loneliness has been ameliorated or even cured over time. The pro-attitudes that used to drive her lonely feelings have receded, and she no longer has a negatively-valenced awareness of frustrated goals and missing goods. So, we need to exercise caution in attributing loneliness to a person in hypotheticals like these. Secondly, recall that a person's objective status might intelligibly be described as "lonely" – when, for example, she is consistently alone – without this entailing that she *feels* lonely. So, it may be that it is the objective situation of the chronically lonely person that is best described as lonely, with no implication for the subjective character of her emotional state.

With these observations in mind, let us reiterate the range of pro-attitudes that is hypothesised to be missing in the case at hand. It can be stipulated that the agent has no yearning for company, no wish to talk to others, no desire for practical or moral support, no felt need to express her sociable side, no wistful longing for lost friendship, and no joyful anticipation of future social goods. We posit that a systematic

absence of occurrent desires of these sorts reveals an underlying lack of concern for social goods, and that this lack of concern transforms how the social world is experienced in chronic loneliness: it yields an *affective flattening* in which people and situations lose their social significance for the subject. This transformation has an impact both upon how the agent perceives the world around her, and how she experiences her own embodied condition. A person for whom the goods of social interaction have lost their allure will, for instance, not be motivated to pursue the range of everyday social activities in which we usually participate. She will feel no urge to enter into conversation or otherwise comport herself as an approachable and receptive social agent, and she will be less attuned to social affordances like facial expressions, gestures, and intonation patterns that animate social interaction. Her "bodily-affective style" (Colombetti & Krueger 2015; Maiese 2016), as we might refer to it – i.e., her habitual ways of moving, expressing herself, and engaging with the social world – is subdued, undemonstrative, and closed to others. In making plans and surveying the future, new and complex social ventures (perhaps even leaving the house) will not arise as salient options – they will not emerge within the space of credible possibilities for action. She will not attend to social goods in thought and memory, nor hope to be the recipient of others' good will.[27] And she will no longer expect to be able to express herself as a social agent, nor to adopt those interpersonal roles that once meant so much to her – she will not aspire to be the nurturing friend, the shoulder to cry on, the confidante, and so forth. In sum, chronic loneliness may result in a narrowing of the subject's horizons as a social agent, and an attenuation to her affective responsiveness to the social world. This flattened affective condition, we suggest, *just is* the way in which loneliness manifests itself when the subject has lost all interest in the spectrum of social goods towards which we are usually positively oriented. It is, in this respect, like the emotional state of joylessness, hopelessness, or

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[27] For an account of what it is to lose hope, see Ratcliffe (2013).

indifference: defined not by a negatively-valenced qualitative character of its own, but by diminished feeling, motivation, and attentiveness.

We can compare this to the more generalised affective flattening described in reports of the phenomenology of psychiatric conditions such as depression (e.g. Fuchs 2013, Ratcliffe 2015). Social difficulties and emotional disturbances in disorders like schizophrenia and depression have received increased attention within the philosophy of psychiatry literature in recent years, particularly in phenomenological psychopathology.[28] However, within this literature, the felt loneliness that often arises from these social difficulties has not been given a separate treatment – despite the fact that a characterization of the latter is not, in itself, sufficient to understand the structure and content of the former. In future work, we intend to apply this analysis of loneliness to a consideration of psychiatric disorders and explore its potential clinical and therapeutic significance.

4. Conclusion

This paper has proposed an analysis of the emotional condition of loneliness. The lonely person, we have argued, is one for whom certain distinctive and desirable social goods seem to be inaccessible or hard to attain, either because the environment appears not to afford them, or because her own social powers feel inadequate to the task. The goods that may strike the lonely person as out of reach include the quotidian benefits that arise between casual friends and colleagues, such as the small pleasures derived from company and conversation. More substantially, they include the support and insight of trusted associates; the intimacy and physical affection that accrues within romantic partnerships; and the care and consideration we enjoy from family members. And because there are traits of one's own personality that find their

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[28] See, e.g., Krueger 2018; Krueger and Colombetti 2018; Ratcliffe 2015; Van Duppen 2017.

expression exclusively in interpersonal contexts, and meaningful roles that can only be played when others are around, a lonely person may feel unable to act out meaningful dimensions of their character and so to realise themselves fully as social agents.

Lastly, we considered the emotional condition of a person whose chronic loneliness has extinguished the social pro-attitudes that usually drive the experience of this emotion; who no longer cares for, or is motivated to achieve, the goods of companionship and intimacy, and who no longer aspires to express herself as a social agent. Here, the individual's emotional state is characterised by a widespread internal loss or attenuation: an affective devitalisation, within which the social world has lost its allure.[29]

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