# Philosophical Counseling and Loneliness: An Interdisciplinary Approach

Ben Mijuskovic[1]

**Abstract:** As individuals, the universal fear of loneliness and the desire to secure intimacy has consumed our thoughts and passions. Ever since the Old Testament and Plato's dialogues, mankind has searched to gain understanding and insights into the dynamics of loneliness. Traditionally, Western thought has assumed, both theologically and philosophically, that the soul or self is a substance, an independent reality secure in-itself in distinction to an external material world. But following the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries, science began systematically to question and even reject the "doctrine" of a *personal identity.* The roots of science are now steadfastly gaining ground in materialism, mechanism, determinism, empiricism, phenomenalism (as opposed to phenomenology), cognitive behaviorism, psychoanalysis, and the current neurosciences, which sciences assume that the lonely and passive patient is best "aided" and "treated" by the active agency and interventions of the clinical "specialist, which often requires pharmacological medications. By contrast, the article contends that philosophical and humanistic therapy and counseling offers a partnered alliance with the subject through interdisciplinary learning. Again, the learning is mutual. The subject controls the issues addressed; it is not a student-teacher relationship.

**Key-words:** Loneliness, reflexive self-consciousness, transcendent intentionality, intimacy, empathy, narcissism, synthetic *a priori,* value judgments, counseling, therapy

[1] California State University Dominguez Hills, ruthben@roadrunner.com

## Introduction

Loneliness is an incredibly multifaceted complexity of cognitive and motivational tentacles. Both loneliness and its remedy, which is intimacy, are best addressed by starting from *within* the sanctuary of the self, as opposed to beginning with the external standpoint of the empirical sciences, as for example medicine, cognitive behavioral psychology, psychoanalysis, the current neurosciences, and the implementation of pharmacological interventions. [1.]

In Western theology and philosophy, as early as Job's lonely challenge before his friends questioning the ways of God toward man in the Old Testament and Plato's dialogue addressing the theme of human isolation and love, beginning with Aristophane's myth recounting the story of the original race of mankind as consisting of aggressive, round roly-poly creatures with two sets of legs and arms, two faces looking in opposite directions, and two sexual organs, female-female, male-male, and female-male, and because these powerful primitive humans were so troublesome, it came to pass that finally Zeus split them in half to weaken them. And ever since then, human beings have been searching desperately for our other half (*Symposium,* 189d ff.).

In Western philosophy, the study of loneliness begins with the reality of the self, with Plato's *psyche,* St. Augustine's soul, Descartes's cogito, Leibniz's Monad, Kant's transcendental unity of apperception, Husserl's intentional ego, and Sartre's conception of "the for-itself," as philosophers have forged the connection between self-consciousness, personal identity, and loneliness. Both the metaphysical dualism of Plato and Descartes, as well as the subjective idealism of Kant and the objective idealism of Hegel, which begin with the *activity* of reflexive self-consciousness, all confirm the self as a primary substance along with its indubitable reality. Without a secure self, without an inviolable personal identity, loneliness is meaningless.

By contrast, metaphysical materialism reduces all reality to matter *plus* motion, to neuronal causal motions and electrical synapses in the brain, while epistemic empiricism reduces the "mind" to an impermanent sensory flux sensory *appearances* and subjective feelings (Hume).. Both materialism and empiricism categorically deny the reality of the self. As early as the age of the Roman empire, the skeptic, Pyrrho of Elis, whose friends had to protect him from the paths of horses because he doubted the existence of the external world as well as his own reality, while in the modern period Hume denied the reality the self as a substance (section *Of Personal Identity* in *A Treatise of Human Nature,* Book I, Section VI), and more recently A. J. Ayers' rejection of a substantial "self"

(*Language, Truth and Logic* (Chapter VII), materialists, empiricists, and neuroscientist have collectively denied the reality of the self.

The second discipline illuminating loneliness is literature, especially after the advent of the narrative form of the novel. The novel, whether written in the first person narrative or the third person form, always temporally unrolls and unravels consciousness from the interior, from the immanence of an internal time-consciousness (Kant, Husserl). With Descartes, we can deny the existence of the external world, with Hume, we can deny the existence of the self, but we cannot deny our own privileged access to a personal, self-enclosed sphere of time-consciousness (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* A 97-104). Even Hume is forced to admit that and even God cannot deceive me that I exist alone in time. There are two times, external, objective, scientific time that measures the movements of objects in space, the shared time of clocks, calendars, and birthdays, but there is also a subjective immanent time, a lonely time that cannot be shared.

> The reason that impels me to write this is not that I think my knowledge of loneliness is different in kind from that of other men. Quite the contrary. The whole conviction of my life now rests upon the belief that loneliness far from being a rare and curious phenomenon, peculiar to myself and to a few solitary other men, is the central and inevitable fact of human existence. When we examine the moments, acts and statements of all kinds of people—not only the grief and ecstasy of the greatest poets, but also of the huge unhappiness of the average soul, as evidenced by the innumerable strident words of abuse, hatred, contempt, mistrust, and scorn that forever grate upon our ears as the man swarm passes us in the street—we find, I think, that they are all suffering from the same thing. The final cause of their complaint is loneliness ("God's Lonely Man," in *The Hills Beyond*).

We tend to think of lonely individuals as sad, depressed, and even weak and we feel sorry for them. But Wolfe corrects us. The first impulse against loneliness, beginning with the infant in his crib, is anger--the depression follows later. The psychoanalyst, Gregory Zilboorg, in the first article written on our topic, executes a Kantian synthetic *a priori* relation between narcissism > loneliness > hostility ("Loneliness," *Atlantic Monthly,* 1938). These insights into the painful and dangerous effects of loneliness are soon followed in other psychoanalytic works by Frieda Fromm-Reichmann and Erich Fromm. But the point is that philosophical counseling is the best approach and remedy for addressing these complicated issues. The philosophical method is intrinsically contemplative, speculative; it addresses issues and problems "at a distance," so to speak. It *cognitively* addresses loneliness as opposed to concentrating on its emotional aspects. I was trained in cognitive behavioral therapy and we were essentially

directed to ask the distressed patient, "And how did that make you feel?" Rather the questions should be "And *why* do you think you are lonely?" and "What are you going to do about it?"

In going forward, I wish to distinguish three forms of relational *judgments* to show how they apply to the experience of loneliness. First, an *analytic* judgment is *universally* and *necessarily,* i.e., *a priori* true; it is true by definition, by virtue of the law of identity, e. g., A=A; 2+3=5; and "All bachelors are unmarried males." Second, a *synthetic* judgment is empirical and factual; the relation between the subject term and the predicate term is *contingently* supplied by experience, e. g., "The cat is on the mat." It may or may not be *factually* true. Synthetic judgments tell us something about the world and about human existence; they are informative. Third, there are some philosophers (at least Kant, Fichte, Husserl, and Sartre), who posit *both a priori and* synthetic relations as inseparable. For Kant, all self-consciousness is judgmental (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* A 107-110); it is only possible if the subject (the self) is universally and necessarily related, connected to a conceptual "object." In Hegel, it must be to another self (*Phenomenology of Spirit,* "Lordship and Bondage"). Without a relation of "self" to "other than self," self-consciousness cannot exist. When I am lonely, I *know* the *isolation,* the *separation* of myself as *distinct,* from the other self—and I *feel* it. It follows that no one could psychologically survive without forging a relation to some "thing" beyond one's self. The absence of that special necessary relation of the self to an object or other self is psychosis. In Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents,* this dynamic is described when the infant ego first realizes that an inanimate foreign "object," i.e., the mother's breast is some "thing" he desperately desires and worse yet, it is in the control of an "other self" (Part I, the "oceanic feeling"). This is the origin of narcissism and loneliness.

The essence of loneliness is *separation.* The first separation is object-object separation, the fetus from the womb (Freud's first anxiety state); second the separation of the self from an object, the mother's breast (Freud); third separation of the self from the other-self, the mother (Freud); fourth the separation of the self against its self (psychosis); and fifth the separation of the self from its ideals, its values, e. g., "estrangement from God (Mijuskovic (2019).

When imprisoned individuals are condemned to solitary confinement for extended periods of time, psychosis soon intervenes. Working as a therapist in a mental health clinic, I was once assigned to meet with a 24-year-old "client," who had been isolated for five years. No *meaningful* "intervention" or even a communicative exchange between us seemed possible and in fact he failed to return after a couple of visits. In a theological context, I would venture to speculate that no human being would wish to be immortal, to exist forever on the condition that s/he would be the only creature in the entire universe.

I now wish to offer some comments regarding a second set of judgmental distinctions. We can define a proposition as a statement that is either true or false. First, some judgments apply, i.e., refer to *primary* "qualities." Primary qualities are really empirical *quantities;* they apply to physical objects and/or events in the world; they (presumably) exist independently of the mind in the external world. They are also *causally* structured and *measurable*. For example, I can factually describe an object as six-feet tall and weighing 160 pounds; or I can describe a causal accident between two cars. Essentially, they consist of scientific, factual judgments.

Second, subjective judgments only apply to our *personal* sensed *qualities,* to our individual mental sensations and feelings; they are unique to the individual and non-sharable; they only exist in my mind as *appearances* and they are incorrigible, non-factual. If *I* experience seeing a red color, someone else cannot "correct" me.

Third, there are judgments of *value.* Human loneliness is an existential *universal value; it is a definable quality* we all share and experience; values persist throughout our lives in all mankind. Loneliness is a *quality* experienced alone but shared in common as a *meaning*. Higher order animals, dogs for example, can be lonely but they do not *articulate* judgments concerning its *value* in terms of the goal in avoiding it. Dogs do not formulate plans on how to avoid it. Each of us self-consciously thinks and plans how to avoid it. The dominant purpose of avoiding loneliness and securing intimacy defines our "genus." Each self-conscious nesses is internally *constituted*--not empirically caused—to know and to feel loneliness and seek to secure intimacy. It further follows that there is an endless myriad of meanings signifying loneliness, as for example, rejection, abandonment, jealousy, alienation, estrangement, exile, excommunication, neglect, avoidance, forlornness, disrespect, criticism, and so on. *All these meanings are constitutive synthetic a priori species of the genus loneliness.* For example, when someone experiences rejection, it is because they immediately *know*—and *feel*—that they are lonely. Loneliness and rejection are *a priori* and synthetically related. But beyond that, we also *know* that underlying the sadness is a bed of unresolved anger and hostility.

Therefore, tertiary judgments apply to *values,* to cognitive distinctions of *quality* between good and evil; beauty and plainness; intelligence and ignorance; security and danger; loneliness and intimacy; and so on. By contrast, empiricism reduces all values to subjective feelings of pain or pleasure; they are not real, they do not exist independently of the subjective mind, e. g., Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian hedonistic calculus, which "ethically" measures the criterion of "goodness" according to the principle of "the greatest pleasure of the greatest number."

In a famous passage by Max Weber, he challenges the capacity of scientists and politician, *qua* ethicists, *to make moral* judgments.

> "Science is meaningless because it has no answer to the only questions that matter to us: What should we do? How shall we live?" The fact that science cannot give us this answer is absolutely indisputable. The question is only in what sense does it give us a "no" answer, and whether or not it might after all prove useful for somebody who is able to ask the right question. [2.] Weber

In short, a scientist can tell us how to make an atomic bomb but not how or when to use it. And we recall that it was a US President, a politician, that decided when and where to use it, actually in Japan in 1945 closing the Second World War.

Loneliness and intimacy are *cognitive* judgments about *values;* they *intend values.* They are constituted as judgmental *a priori* synthetic *meanings and internal relations.* They are not merely subjective sensations, feelings, or emotions. It is this epistemic principle that is the critical validation in justifying philosophical counseling as it opens the self to an increasingly more expansive vista of understanding and insight.

Philosophical counseling is essentially interdisciplinary. For example, Professor Lou Marinoff in one of his articles cites an exchange of meetings I had with a monk when he came to my mental health clinic and I met with him for a number of sessions. He had joined a monastery at the age of seventeen and I saw him when he was thirty-five and he was experiencing religious doubts in terms of his commitment to the church. My clinic's rules for admission stipulated that I had to officially open his case, I had to assign a *DSM* psychiatric diagnosis. Technically, we agreed on "depression," but we addressed his issue in the context of St. Augustine's *Confessions.* His dilemma was religious, not psychiatric. [3.] Marinoff. Human crises—existential crises—are perfectly natural to our intellectual, psychological, and moral makeup and occur and reoccur during the entire length of our human existence on this earth. To label them as symptomatic "disorders" and "dysfunctions" is not only unhelpful and wrong, but also frequently counterproductive and dangerous because it fosters the impression that the "problem" to be "corrected" is virtually "outside" the self; or that it is situated in a chemical imbalance in the brain (Thomas Szasz).

Previously, I mentioned novelists and novels. Novels are uniquely positioned to provide glimpses and perspectives into the thoughts, feelings, and values of others. Like a philosophical text, the novel is especially rich in human textures and insights because the narrative form is pregnant with subjective first-person viewpoints even when it is written in the third person. Novels lead us beyond our confined sheltered interiors by opening windows and doors to

varying interpretations of both man and reality, as they guide us through minds and worlds different than our own, to perspectives, principles, and paradigms far removed from our own, as we share our selves, thoughts, and feelings with the novelist, but it is always in relation to our self. We learn from the novels and generally we morally judge the characters as well. This advantage is doubled when we are able to share it in concert with others. Stated in this fashion, philosophical counseling requires reading and studying, with the provision that what is to be read is agreed upon in terms of relevance.

Philosophical therapy is interdisciplinary, although theoretically counselors may prefer to exhibit certain specialties. As a children's therapist, I used pictures, paintings, and photos in my sessions by encouraging the children to express and share their impressions, thoughts, and feelings. It seemed more comfortable for them to concentrate on the images rather than themselves. This "distancing effect" has a liberating advantage in philosophical counseling with adults as well. Accordingly, paintings can also serve as a vital invitation for adults to express themselves. In my university courses on Loneliness, I devoted entire classes to showing slides. For example, the Medieval paintings of Christ on the Cross, its *meaning; what is the intention, who is the audience?*; the intensely introspective self-portraits of Van Gogh, no less than twenty-seven of them, which accompanied his poignant letters to his brother, as he unburdened himself of his terrible sense of desolation, *its meaning;* the expressionist paintings of Edvard Munch, who suffered from psychosis, *its meaning*; there was a black artist, who painted self-portraits of himself as white; *its meaning*; and many others, Rouault's clowns; Ivan Albright's grotesques, Raphael Soyer's naked girl turning puberty; Edward Hopper's desolate houses and empty streets; and Andrew Wyeth solitary subjects; they all invite us to ponder, study and safely address and explore our thoughts about loneliness from "a safe distance," and all their deeper *meanings.* By reading, studying, and discussing Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,* and by comparing and contrasting his views on private property, alienation, the division of labor, we learn to deepen our own political thoughts, feelings, and values. And then there is Freud. By *studying* Freud—as opposed to one's self being psychoanalyzed as a specimen under a microscope—we can enormously expand our interdisciplinary arsenal and horizons with illuminating objectivity and productive sharing.

During the 1990's, there was a strong movement toward philosophical counseling carried forward by the assumption that our universal plight of loneliness could be addressed—not "treated"—independently of psychiatric symptoms, such as depression and anxiety. Importantly both individuals and group participants could be safely dynamically and dialectically exposed to conflicting ideas and values they wished to explore and resolve. [4.] Once more,

the special advantage is that in these settings, the themes can be shared in a variety of contexts, religious, ethical, romantic, intellectual, aesthetic, etc. By sharing feelings and thoughts with others, one learns not only about one's self but also about other selves as well. It was Socrates who declared that the unexamined life is not worth living and that each of us should truly seek to "Know thyself."

As intimated, the remedy to loneliness is also grounded in a constitutive synthetic *a priori* relation, which dually unifies empathy and intimacy. Once again, the relation between loneliness, empathy, and intimacy is an *a priori* synthetic one. [5.] Generally, people misuse the term empathy as essentially synonymous with sympathy or even pity. But empathy eidetically, intentionally, phenomenologically *means* a mutual and reciprocal relationship and a sharing between at least two individuals, distinct selves, whereas sympathy and pity in Lipps' version of empathy is restrictively one-sided. For example, a mother can feel sympathy for her toddler but not empathy. It requires dually shared, mutual, and *reciprocal* cognitions and feelings between at least two human beings.

According to Lipps, when we observe a performer's dance, we *project our feelings of grace, balance, freedom of movement, and beauty—we intend our expressions into the vibrancy of the female form.* But *genuine* empathy is mutual; (a) the meanings, (b) the feelings, and (c) the affection must be dually shared, experienced by both parties. Imagine, for instance, a young couple grieving the drowning death of their infant child. They share the distress, the share of absence, the loneliness. Or an elderly happily matched couple learning that one of them has been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Their thoughts and feelings are as one. They are mutually shared and reciprocated. Empathy is the shared path in the journey, but intimacy is the achieved stable destination. While through empathy we share feelings, meanings, and affection, in intimacy, at a deeper and in a more secure fashion, we mutually share (d) trust, (e) decisions, and (f) values with the other self. What remains is to confirm the sense of security by the constancy of shared communication and commitment.

In Christian thought, the loneliness, the empathy, and the intimacy are *symbolically, indirectly mediated* through the image of the suffering Christ on the Cross. One shares in his suffering by *identifying with his care for us* through the *quality* of his suffering. Similarly, the political prisoner in his cell is not lonely because he intimately relates to an ethical *quality, an ideal, a constant value*. Empathy and intimacy are natural to all human beings. As Aristotle long ago declared, human friendship can only prevail among equals (*Nicomachean Ethics,* Books VIII and IX).

When I was an undergraduate student at the University of Chicago, the curriculum promoted the Great Books Program, the classics of Western thought. The role of the professor was that of a moderator. S/he did not lecture. They

merely guided the group discussion. We learned and taught equally from each other. Likewise, philosophical, literary, artistic, psychological, ethical, etc., counseling should be like that. In individual counseling, the subject—*not* the patient—chooses the theme(s), while in group settings, it would be determined by the unanimity of the members. But in the latter case, group modality, the counselor guides the process, "therapy" is not a teaching enterprise.

**Conclusion**

Loneliness is a highly intense experience, and its resolution must be matched by an equal intensity. That means it cannot be extended beyond certain defined participant limits, otherwise conflicts of interest tend to disrupt the critical experience of positive sharing. The self-sustaining key to the sharing is the agreement on the same values. The difference between sharing pleasant occasions and times as opposed to sharing values makes all the difference. The latter requires a much stronger and stable association.

Currently there is a global pandemic of loneliness that only promises to exponentially increase in extensity and intensity. Presently, there are eight billion rootless monadic human atoms circumnavigating the globe. The old traditional bonds of human relationships, of belonging instituted by conjugal relations, family, extended families, clans, tribes, ethnic neighborhoods, and so on are disintegrating through divorce, single parenthoods, and fierce occupational mobility and competition. Countries are actually not only realizing the danger of loneliness but desperately trying to address it. England instituted a Minister of Loneliness, who promptly quit after shortly facing the enormity of the problem. I presented at an international conference on loneliness at Brunel University in England in October 2015; more recently at Tampere University in Finland in December, 2019, and as late as last September, 2020 at the University of Szczecin in Poland. The conference, "Together Alone Again," the second one, was represented by no less than seventeen countries and there is every indication that it will both continue and expand.

**Warning**

Let me conclude with a warning. Philosophical counselors are not licensed. In one of the Notes below, I caution about the danger of counseling individuals who may be seriously disoriented, psychotic, paranoid, or suicidal. Obviously, in extreme cases, psychiatric medication may be legitimately indicated. But the counselor may be especially vulnerable to deceptions. The philosophical therapist must respect his limitations.

**Notes and references**

1. Mijuskovic, Ben, "Loneliness: An Interdisciplinary Approach," *Psychiatry: A Journal for Interpersonal Processes,* 40:2 (1977); *Loneliness in Philosophy, Psychology, and Literature* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2012, 3rd edition); *Feeling Lonesome: The Philosophy, and Psychology of Loneliness* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015); Chapter 2, "Cognitive and Motivational Roots of Universal Loneliness," in *Addressing Loneliness: Coping, Prevention and Clinical Interventions,* edited by Ami Sha'ked and Ami Rokach (New York: Routledge, 2015); and *Consciousness and Loneliness: Theoria and Praxis* (Leiden: Brill, 2018-2019.

2. Weber, Max, *The Vocation Lectures: "Science as a Vocation"; "Politics as a Vocation"* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2004), xxxi. Cf. Spiegelberg, Herbert, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965): "For a full appraisal of the real concern one must know of the great debate in Germany of the early twenties raised by Max Weber's lecture on 'Science as a Vocation,' in which he had stated bluntly that science was constitutionally unfit to settle questions of value and hence questions of meaning for personal existence. All it could do was to supply us with factual and technical data for decisions which were essentially extra-scientific," 79-80.

3. Cf., Martin, Mike, "Ethics as Therapy," *International Journal of Philosophical Practice,* 1:1 (2001), 5 ff., which discusses my intervention with the disillusioned cleric.

4. Mijuskovic, Ben, "Some Reflections on Philosophical Counseling and Psychotherapy," published in *Essays on Philosophical Counseling,* edited by Ran Lahav and Maria da Venza Tillmans (1995); "Theories of Consciousness, Therapy, and Loneliness," published in *Counseling and Psychotherapy,* edited by Elliott Cohen and Samuel Zinaich (New Castle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013); and "Further Reflections on Philosophical Counseling," Academia, 2/96.

5. Lipps, Theodor, "Empathy, Inner Imitation, and Sense Feelings," published in *A Modern Book of Aesthetics: An Anthology,* edited by Melvin Rader (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960); and cf. Ben Mijuskovic, "The Role of Empathy as a Path to Intimacy," *Paedagogia Christiana,* 46:2 (2020).

6. Consult Sam Brown, *Reflections: Society for Philosophy in Practice,* "The therapeutic status of philosophical counseling" (2010), 112 ff., which warns of my legal concerns regarding unlicensed therapy: "In particular, Ben Mijuskovic offers a list of methodological differences in "Some Reflections in Counseling and Psychotherapy."