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Some Notes on the Phenomenon of Solitude

Zapiski o fenomenie samotności

Abstract: In philosophy, the problem of solitude has traditionally been either ignored or treated trivially. And when philosophy tackles solitude, it often relies on two unconvincing presuppositions. The first is that to be alone one has to put oneself first; the second is that solitude can be both good and bad. What ensues from this two-pronged approach to solitude? *Solitary solitude* is both sought-after and happy, and *lonely solitude* both sustained and sad. But once the distinction has been set up, solitude is still not sufficiently described, because neither form of solitude is really solitude. The first one is sheer *aloneness*, and the second refers to *loneliness*, far removed from the phenomenon of *soloist solitude*.

Keywords: solitude; aloneness; loneliness.

Abstrakt: W filozofii problem samotności był zwykle ignorowany lub traktowany trywialnie. Gdy próbuje się jej stawić czoła, często bazuje się na dwóch nieprzekonujących presupozycjach. Pierwsza zakłada, iż aby być samemu, trzeba postawić siebie na pierwszym miejscu; druga – że samotność może być dobra i zła. Co wynika z tego dwustronnego podejścia do samotności? Samotnicza samotność, poszukiwana i szczęśliwa, oraz osamotniona samotność, długotrwała i smutna. Jed-

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nak gdy przedstawiamy owo rozróżnienie, samotność wciąż nie jest wystarczająco opisana, ponieważ obie te formy nie są tak naprawdę samotnością. Pierwsza jest najzwyklejszym „byciem samemu", a druga osamotnieniem, dalekim od fenomenu samotności – „solisty".

Słowa kluczowe: samotność; bycie samemu; osamotnienie.

In philosophy, the issue of solitude usually remains unaddressed, if not radically silenced. Its intrinsic difficulty perhaps partially explains this. In one sense, indeed, speaking of it is impossible, since to evoke it overtly is already to doubt its reality, and perhaps even to concede that it has none. Incapable of not having an interlocutor, I always speak for someone, if only for myself, and I am therefore never alone, not even with myself – the person who is alone, as has been said, is always in good company, no matter how 'bad' it may be (Valéry, 1962, p. 275). As a silent dialogue of the soul with itself, thinking requires alterity – plurality is not necessary, duality suffices. And let us agree that the discussion of ideas which philosophy is always implies a community, and thus the intervention, the mediation, of others in my own reflection – even if only one other, who will be no more alone than I am, which the other stops me from being since I am with them. Thus, as soon as it is pronounced, solipsism denies itself. It is derisory, delirious solipsism that is only the thesis of a 'madman ensconced in an impenetrable blockhouse' (Sartre, 1943, p. 284, quoting Schopenhauer).

Conversely, knowing something of solitude is ultimately to be incapable of recognising it, for the person who is truly alone is not capable of – or at least not in the mood for – speaking about how things are with her/him, and, consequently, about what solitude is. We have to decide: either this solitude is merely accidental, and I will act once again as if the other were there, even if my voice has an echo only in the air and in stone; or this solitude is original, and it cannot be a matter of a me who, for better or worse, can neither be, nor be what and who I am, without others. Solitude is strange, therefore, in that – like death – it is not there when we exist, and governs as sovereign when we exist no more. As it is beyond experience and incommunicable, strictly speaking, this would justify us in saying nothing of it: about that which we can neither live nor say, we must remain silent.

It has been clear since antiquity that no person can exist in solitude – no-one can produce and thus suffice unto him/herself – and thus, that no person can be a human being in solitude. Whatever lives outside of the community

is either a beast or a God: the philosopher thinks about no other thing less than s/he thinks about solitude. Philosophy is always a meditation on society, at the very least on sociality, and not on solitude. Whence the silence of the great canonical thinkers on the subject – a silence that is not deafening since it is not even heard as such, with some rare exceptions that do not emerge unscathed from two fundamental aporias that beset any discourse concerning it. For when philosophy comes to treat the question of solitude, from afar or in detail, it relies on two presuppositions whose deconstruction is not easy.

The *first* requires that solitude be determined on the basis of the *ego*, that it be understood as a mode, a passion or volition of the *ego*, whatever its status – transcendental or otherwise – may be. This means that in praising or condemning solitude, it is subject to one and the same condition of possibility, with the presumed thesis that in order to be alone, it is necessary to be – to be in the primary sense – and that is to say, to be as an *ego*.

The *second* relates to the ambivalence of solitude, which is a blessing for some, but a curse for others. This ambivalence is all the greater for the absence of any initial ambiguity in the word. The solitary person is indeed traditionally seen as either a reprobate or one of the chosen few. And if one wants to decide which it is on the basis of the person concerned, solitude divides itself into *solitary solitude*, the solitude that I chose and that I want in separating myself deliberately from others, and *lonely solitude*, the solitude to which I am subject and that I lament, as separated from my peers against my will. With this distinction in hand, the radical invisibility of solitude is guaranteed, for here we have not two distinct forms, but two different appreciations of it, which in changing give the impression that it is plural.

It is the second of these presuppositions that I would like to discuss here, for at present there are doubtlessly more psychologists or sociologists than there are metaphysicians, particularly with an interdisciplinary approach to this obviously pressing and paradoxical question in our age of hyper-connectivity. Announced in 2011 as a ‘national issue of great importance’ in France, in the United Kingdom of 2018 the struggle against solitude became the office of a minister (Prime Minister Teresa May named Tracey Crouch as Minister for Sport, Civil Society and Loneliness). In democratic societies, solitude is gaining ground, increasing with age (in France, 7% of those in the 15–25 age bracket are counted as isolated, 11% in the 25–39 age bracket, 12% beyond that) as much as it is increasing in time (in France, 5 million people older than 15, i.e. one in ten citizens, only rarely meet and spend time with their family, friends, neighbours or acquaintances, which is a million more people than six years ago). One speaks of ‘solitude’ in this sort of

inquiry, but after having defined what qualifies as an objective situation of isolation (never physically meeting the members of all one's networks of sociability – family, friends, neighbours, colleagues from work or collective associations – or having only quite episodic contacts with these different networks), it is often admitted that the feeling of solitude does not entirely cover the objective isolation thus defined. Certainly, the subjectivity of the experience affects so much the expression of the feeling of solitude that 38% of people who are objectively isolated declare themselves not to feel alone: nearly one in three people (29%) feel alone often or every day, against 16% who can rely on a number of networks of sociability. In sum, there are solitude and solitudes; in other words, there is solitude and what it is not – *desolation* as well as *isolation*.

The term *desolation* comes from the low Latin *desolare*, which means 'leave alone', from which we also get 'devastate', which is to say transform into solitude by devastation. Thus pillagers desolate the country. Desolation is a calamity, a destruction, a devastation. What is desolate has been abandoned, left to its own devices, without any help or recourse to anything else in the face of danger. Desolation is thus not solitude for two reasons: first, I can be familiar with solitude without being in desolation – the sailor, alone on the sea, in the absence of any imminent peril, is not desolate; second, I can be familiar with desolation without being in solitude – if no-one comes to my aid, I can be desolate among a crowd. We should add that the opposite of desolation is consolation, the consolation that implies the presence of the other in order to relieve pain, to lessen the difficulty experienced.

The term *isolation*, for its part, refers back to the Italian *isolato*, which means 'separate like an island' – *insula* in Latin. Isolation is the state of a thing separated from things that share its nature: distanced, separated, withdrawn. Isolation is not to be confused with solitude either, for the person isolated is separate from the others because the others have separated themselves from the person. The isolated person has been excluded. Isolation is therefore the emotional drama experienced by the conscience that, deep in suffering, would like to entrust itself to and communicate with the other, but is incapable of doing so. This is the case of the person suffering from a contagious disease confined to an isolation ward (Lulu suffering from cholera in Alban Berg's opera), of the prisoner (the Count of Monte Cristo in the Château d'If), the madman (those depicted by Hogarth in *Bedlam*), of the dissident (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn or Andrei Sakharov, famous opponents of the soviet regime, who were interned in psychiatric hospitals or deported to the Gulag), of the disgraced (that of the superintendent Fouquet, initially

banished and then imprisoned for life in the fortress of Pignerol), of the exiled (Ovid in exile on the edge of the Black Sea or Brecht after the *auto-da-fé* of his works), or of the undesirable (Philoctetes to Lemnos in Sophocles' play or Napoleon on the island of Elba). But isolation, as instantiated by quarantine, seclusion, incarceration or sequestration, is not solitude for, on the one hand, I can be alone without being isolated – I can be alone among my friends, alone in my family – and, on the other hand, I can be isolated without being alone – by being isolated in my prison in sad company.

Once we have clarified this, what we can say positively about solitude? The term *solitude* is originally the state of a place that is deserted, that is uninhabited or distanced from populated places. Solitude is thus a hideout, a retreat, a shelter, a refuge. It is in this sense that Petrarch inherits the image of the port, of the haven, borrowed from an immemorial Latin tradition – from Cicero to Pierre Damien, passing through Ambroise, Jerome, Augustine or Paulin de Nole. But as I've already said, if there exists a whole *litteratura perennis* on solitude, it has no *philosophia*. Being 'happy and calm', solitude is for philosophy

> in truth, a fortified citadel and a port at the heart of all storms. What would the person who flees it be exposed to, if not to being far from a port, to being blown around the ocean of events, to living between the reefs and to die between the waves? (Petrarch, 1346, I, p. iv)

Solitude is thus always the solitude of a place first of all; it describes a place that has been abandoned, marginalized, withdrawn from, but also describes, by extension, its effects.

The term can thus designate a characteristic, an aspect, an atmosphere (we speak in this sense of the solitude of forests, of the solitude of the night) or a feeling. Hence solitude is at once a physical and a psychological state, a state of mind bound to this factual state. The country vista that one sees becomes the image, the reflection of the soul that remains inside the person, in such a way that the place where one lives becomes the mirror of the being that one is. Whence the two senses of the word *solitude* as it is usually employed: on the one hand, solitude as the situation of someone who, in fact, is alone, in a momentary or durable way, voluntarily or involuntarily; and on the other hand, solitude as a feeling of the person who feels alone with him or herself, in whatever setting he or she finds him or herself: in savage nature, in human society, or in the intimacy of a bedroom.

We should underline that these two levels of significance, although they can go together – physical solitude quite often induces psychological, moral or affective solitude, and vice versa – they do not always come together. Logically, as well as in reality, there are in fact four possibilities: 1) there is nobody there, and I am and feel alone; 2) there is nobody there, I am alone but I do not feel it; 3) there is somebody there, I am not alone and I do not feel alone; 4) there is somebody there, I am not alone but I feel alone. Of course, it is necessary to briefly evoke several causes of solitude. As physical, it can be caused by a rupture – leaving to go on a voyage, the end of a personal relationship, the death of a loved one; as psychological, by the incomprehension of those around us, the disappointment that this causes in me, our difficulties in communicating, melancholy, boredom, etc. But it is necessary above all to try to ascertain its value. This is the issue of real difficulty, for if the term *solitude* is not in itself ambiguous, the reality to which it refers proves itself to be of a rare ambivalence.

Solitude, indeed, has always been experienced and judged in two opposed ways, and this all the more so in that, like all human experiences, it is bound to social, economic and political structures in which the human being finds itself implicated. Thus, it cannot have the same sense across different epochs. It is still true that, in speaking of solitude, the question remains unchanged over time, the essential issue being that of knowing whether the solitary person is a reprobate or one of the chosen ones. This opposition is not new, since it is present in the Bible itself, where it is written that 'it is not good for a man to be alone' (Gen 2:18), and even that 'misfortune befalls the person who falls alone without someone else to help him up!' (Ecc 4:10); yet Moses is described as being alone when, on Mount Sinai, far from the people whose flight beyond Egypt he has guided, he receives the Tablets of the Law. And the tradition is long that develops this figure of solitude, wherein it is no longer accursed, but a blessing, even holy, for it is a sign of election and greatness. The religious tradition first of all: before isolating himself on the Mount of Olives, Jesus withdraws for forty days to the desert, opening the path to innumerable hermits after him for whom solitude is the necessary condition of asceticism. Then the military tradition: the knight is alone on the eve of combat, like the tactician before the battle. The political tradition also: monarchs are alone, the greats of this world, with or without distraction, in order to lead their peoples.

A blessing, then, or a curse? Victor Hugo made the answer depend on who was in question: 'solitude is good for great souls and bad for small minds', for it 'disturbs the brains of those it doesn't illuminate' (Hugo, 1987,

p. 889). Whence a classic distinction: *solitary solitude* on the one hand, or *aloneness*, the solitude that I choose and that I want in separating myself deliberately from others. In this sense, aloneness is a movement opposed to isolation, whose result is experienced positively. On the other hand, there is *lonely solitude*, *loneliness*, the solitude to which I am subject and that I lament, separated as I am from others against my will – in this sense, loneliness is a genus of which desolation and isolation are species. We should say more about this.[1]

The solitude of the solitary person is an active solitude, a solitude desired by the one who experiences it, who enjoys it and likes it, or the solitude of lovers desiring to love each other without trouble or jealousy; but above all, the solitude of the one who has opted for the life of the hermit, the solitude of the misanthrope or that of the philosopher. Because it enchants the one who lives it, solitude is here celebrated for its blessings. A whole tradition beginning with Petrarch bears witness to this. Here solitude draws its value from the 'intimate and true sweetness' (Petrarch, 1346, I, p. v) that it procures. It offers rest far from the agitation of men, and the peace necessary to meditate on oneself. For 'instead of the din', the *solitarius* has 'quietude, instead of the hubbub, silence, instead of the crowd, his own being. He is his own companion, his own company and does not fear solitude for he is in his own presence' (Petrarch, 1346, I, p. ii). These last words are crucial. Here solitude is not sought because it protects our natural innocence from the world (as Rousseau says in *Discourse on the Origin and the Grounds*

[1] This distinction is not the same as the one proposed by Hannah Arendt, between *loneliness*, *isolation* and *solitude* – the only truly conceptual distinction in philosophy on the subject of solitude. First, during the fifties – in 'Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government' (1953), text that was added as Chapter 13 to the second augmented edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 1958, pp. 475–477), but also 'The Great Tradition and the Nature of Totalitarianism' (1953) and 'On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay in Understanding' (1953–1954) in Arendt's *Papers* at the Library of Congress. Then, during the sixties – 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy' (1965) (Arendt, 2003, pp. 97–100). *Loneliness* is by far the worst of these three experiences for Arendt: it is the situation of the one surrounded by people with whom they find it impossible to enter into contact; so much so that, unrecognised and thus unconfirmed in their identity, they lose themselves and their bearings in the world. *Isolation* is the situation of the one stuck in the private sphere and, for that reason, condemned to being politically impotent, since they are deprived of the capacity to act with others. *Solitude* is the situation of the one who, in their own company, can truly reach themselves and, consequently, dialogue with themselves and thus truly think. In my view, isolation is a mode of loneliness and both are ways of experiencing solitude, which as self-companionship is a companionship that is the price to pay for being. I'll come back to this at the end.

of Inequality between Men), nor because it allows us to dream, to walk and contemplate nature, even to collect plants (according to the Rousseau of *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*), nor because it allows us to experience the good fortune of existence (this is the Rousseau of the *Third Letter to M. Malesherbes*). Rather than seeking solitude because it saves us from the hassles of the world and from wasting time within it, solitude is sought because it makes time for our work and our creations, because it offers the leisure to think about those whom one loves, and because it supports spiritual life in making asceticism as well as introspection possible. Petrarch aspires to it in order to be with himself, in order to '*consistere et secum morari*' (Seneca, 64, I, p. ii) as Seneca, and soon after him, a whole monastic tradition, invited us to do. To dwell with oneself. Why?

Because it is in confronting oneself that a person discovers others and encounters God. In embracing solitude, a person does not so much die to the world as be enabled to understand it better. The distance taken, the step back, offers one first of all the occasion to experience oneself, and thus to know oneself better. Are we not ignorant of ourselves, we who 'live most often not according to our own judgement but to that of the crowd', we who 'let ourselves be taken on so many diversions, following in darkness the steps of others, … that we have become anything before being able to look around and examine what we want to be'? (Petrarch, 1346, I, p. iv). But there is more. Solitude 'simulates or dissimulates nothing, hides nothing, invents nothing' (Petrarch, 1346, I, p. iv); it lets things appear as they are and, in phenomenalizing the world, opens up the possibility of knowing it; it makes us grasp it as a creation of a being that is superior to it. Solitude proves itself to be 'the means of rising towards the place to which our soul aspires' (Petrarch, 1346, I, p. iv).

Consequently, solitude presents itself for many as the condition of knowledge, and even, since it is a practical as well as theoretical question, as the condition of wisdom. And because it not only procures wisdom, but also 'conserves and favours it to the highest degree' (Petrarch, 1346, I, p. iii), it is in the figure of study and work that solitude appears to thinkers; it is structured by 'divine eulogies, literature, the discovery of new things or remembrance of old ones, the necessity of rest and honest diversions' (Petrarch, 1346, I, p. ii). Thus, it is not without 'culture', without which it would be 'a certain exile, a prison, a bed of torture' (Petrarch, 1346, I, p. iii). Allowing, on the contrary, one 'to devote oneself to reading and writing', ready to 'relieve the fatigue produced by one with the other' (Petrarch, 1346, I, p. vi), solitude must be devoted to such activities. It is destined for 'no-

ble occupations of which one cannot imagine that there exist others whose company was more useful and more savoured' (Petrarch, 1346, II, p. xiv), delighted by the contemplation of nature and comforted by the frequent visits of friends, so as not to become 'extreme and inhuman solitude' (Petrarch, 1346, I, p. vii). What does that mean?

This is the lonely solitude mentioned above, a passive solitude, one submitted to and not sought after. Solitude is thus experienced as a poison because of the evils that it can occasion: boredom, of course, in the strong sense of the Latin *in odio esse* (hatred), and fear, due to the fact that in losing contact with humanity, we lose certain essential faculties (the Robinson of Michel Tournier in *Friday, or, The Other Island*, no longer knows how to smile). It can produce the metaphysical anguish of dereliction (thus Christ's complaint at Golgotha: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?', Mk 15:34) but also an unhealthy exaltation that can adopt different accents: pride, egocentrism, persecution complexes, illusions, false ideas, an unreal life, etc. Thus experienced, solitude is the difficult and painful feeling of the one who suffers from the absence of others or, rather, from a certain absence of themselves, for that proves irreducible to their physical absence – I can easily feel alone and suffer from it, while the other can be there, there where I am, in flesh and blood. How is it then that solitude can be a matter of great suffering, a fact ignored by the theorists of solitary life, for whom, as an essential condition of the work of thought, it is a necessary discipline and expresses a deliberate choice?

To be sure, the other must have a particular importance to me for their absence to hurt me. The other thus proves to be quite ambivalent: needed by the lonely person, the other is inopportune for the solitary person; the latter sees the other's existence as limited by their own, but without the other, the former does not exist. Whence two contradictory aspirations in the person, whose antagonism is formulated by Kant as a sociable insociability: a need for solitude, on the one hand, since others trouble me and the world turns me away from myself; and, on the other hand, the necessity of a relation to the other, for it is the other who makes me be and makes me be me. Between the two, of course, the heart swings, and it is therefore understandable that, in order to avoid discomfort as well as dissatisfaction, Petrarch, grappling with this alternative, did not want to decide. He was ready to push the paradox to the point of promoting a solitude open to the other in such a way as no longer to be one. 'It is in solitude also that I welcome friends … without whom, I say, life is mutilated, stripped of interest and almost plunged into darkness', declares Petrarch, at the end of *De vita solitaria*. He insists on

the fact that 'no solitude is so absolute, no house so small, no door so closed that it excludes a friend' (Petrarch, 1346, II, p. xiv). This surprising figure of a friendly solitude made of encounters and exchanges, perhaps of a friendship between solitary people where each, alone with her/himself, is never completely alone, is decisive in many ways.

It suggests first of all that the call of the desert can be heard only in the heart of the crowd. If one withdraws when one is loved and supported, this is because fleeing from the other is possible only after having lived with the other. Thus, our existence being always already co-existence, solitude appears essentially as undergoing the presence of the absence of the other. In this way, it is not a disappearance of all ties to others, but always a relation with them, even when it is lived in a deficient mode: that of chosen privation (whence the lack of company that defines the state of solitude), or of the lack submitted to (whence the sensation of lack that defines the feeling of solitude).

It suggests also that friendship is the privileged relation aspired to by the person disappointed either by solitude or by society. As a modality of living together, indeed, solitude is waiting for the presence of the other. If I am alone (whether I deplore or desire the fact), this is because the other is not there, either because physically absent or because, though physically present, the person is emotionally, morally or intellectually distant; too far for me to be able to access the person and for an exchange to be possible between us. In solitude, I who think about the other and who behave accordingly suffer from a relation to the other, from a fully satisfying relationship with the other. Here we see that solitude is desired and/or is felt each time that I cannot find in the other this availability allowing me to be myself. Thus, when I miss the other, when the other is not present, it is above all I who am not present to myself. Such would be, in the end, solitude: not the absence of the other, but the absence of my self to myself. The suffering involved in solitude would derive thus from the impossibility of really being myself, or from the impossibility of being recognised by the other as being this self that I am, which amounts to the same thing. This suffering perhaps comes to annul the authentic friendship described by Aristotle, in which, as a perfect alter ego, the friend makes possible a relation of exchange and, by re-establishing the vital ties of dialogue, saves the person from despair and madness – without, for all that, disturbing the person's retreat, since the friend does not essentially distinguish the two selves. Hence, Petrarch could declare to Philippe de Cabassole (his bishop friend from Cavaillon, dedicatee of the *De vita solitaria*), after having exhorted him to 'give himself to the solitary life':

> … you will not only be my aid in rest, in order to express in a certain way my feelings, you will be my rest itself. You will not only be the relief of my solitude, but, in a certain sense, you will be my solitude (Petrarch, 1346, II, p. xiv).

To conclude, if solitude is desired and promoted by an ancient literary tradition – that to which Petrarch belongs, which remains the only tradition to have thematized the issue – this is insofar as it stands as a condition of solitary life, which is itself the condition of a happy life. While this, the *vita solitaria*, is what is sought, the former, *solitudo*, is barely defined. We have just done so in defining it as the absence of and to oneself. However, in attending closely to the text, one passage of *On the Solitary Life* seems tacitly to point towards another sense of the happy life, without the author having signalled it explicitly. After having admitted his long familiarity with solitude, Petrarch states: 'wherever I go my soul follows me into the heart of forests just as it did in the cities. It is my soul that I have to abandon before anything else' (Petrarch, 1346, I, p. v). Curiously, Petrarch does not describe here the solitude that is his own as an absence to oneself, and thus as a lack of my self to myself, but, on the contrary, as an excess of the self in myself, an abundance of the presence of myself to myself, the 'heart' symbolizing here the very ground of being.

Petrarch perhaps puts his finger on what a few thinkers after him, thinkers closer to us, have attempted to elucidate, and which still remains for us to grasp. Henri-Frédéric Amiel suggests in this sense that 'one tires of being in one's own company after forty years; one ends up becoming bored with oneself and dragging oneself around like a ball and chain' (Amiel, 1976, p. 578). And not without reason: solitude proves to be the condition of any awareness of oneself, as a monad closed in on itself in order to be what it is. Consequently, each of us *is* a solitude in such a way that, metaphysically speaking, the proposition 'man is alone' appears as a postulate, at least as an observation, since it describes what grounds the very reality of individual existence. Thus, I can be with others and desire to drown my sorrows, to lose myself with, by or in them, but I remain alone in relation to myself. This is well known: it is amongst others, in the noise and confusion of a party, that we can feel, cruelly, that, in truth, we are alone, that we live and die alone. Here we see that being-with is not yet being-together, if only because, in order to be, it is necessary to be alone in being oneself, and thus to be alone with oneself. I *am* alone because *I* am. From the second presupposition with which I began, we thus return to the first, from which we would have to start everything all over again. For only by putting to one side solitary solitude,

or aloneness, and lonely solitude, or loneliness, could we finally examine *the* solitude that is *soloist solitude*.

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