



Michał Idasiak

University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland

ORCID: 0000-0003-0037-9439

e-mail: michal.idasiak@us.edu.pl

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Normalization of Solitude: The Task to Be Done

One might venture to say that we have experienced – on an unprecedented scale – the inseparability of our lives from one of the most separating things – solitude. We have experienced it painfully not because we were actually the most separated in our history, but because it struck us so unexpectedly. It would not be a big problem if solitude itself was something we are used to. But the pandemic revealed to us the growing emptiness that we unconsciously bred ourselves – the lack of appreciation of seclusion. We can see this clearly by examining how politics, media, etc. formulated their narration about isolation, an unfortunate circumstance, which we have to endure and wait for better times when we will reconnect again. Such language strongly suggests – more or less directly – that there is not much value in a situation of separation, or even, that it is a painful period, like a sickness, which we have to withstand until we can get back to our lives.

On the other hand, we can hear the voices saying, that there is “no going back” to lives before the pandemic, that we have to adjust our social lives to the new conditions, about which we cannot be sure yet. But do we treat this warning seriously? Are we making any steps towards renewing the value of solitude? Did past generations experience it more fully and with bigger appreciation? These are important questions because they indicate where we should focus our attention – on the past,

the present, or the future. Or, more precisely, how much of this attention we should put into each. If the situation is completely unprecedented, we should focus the most on the present and future to create solutions for incorporating seclusion into our lives. But if the situation, at its core, is something we as a society had experienced in our past before, then we can spend more time rediscovering, instead of inventing. Instead of wondering how to live a good portion of our lives in solitude, we can focus more on finding the right words to express its importance, irremovability, and inseparability. It is a task of creating a fairer, honest, and encouraging discourse of solitude, where we can speak about it more freely, without immediate negative or uneasy associations, as a regular part of our lives. It is a task of normalizing the phenomenon of solitude. Only then we can truly really speak about the benefits, opportunities, and solutions related to it. For now, solitude is too strange, too alien, and too unbearable. Or maybe it just seems like it?

1. Forgetfulness of being alone

The past is rich ground to search for possible tools that will help us deal with our current situation. Of course, just having them will not do anything – using them is a partially forgotten ability. Therefore, I will point out some general steps that need to be taken to use them successfully.

First, we have to retrieve the experience “schemes”. This simply means that we have to dig into the past in this specific context of how people experienced, understood, and described solitude over the centuries. The most difficult aspect is that **if** solitude was a regular part of our lives, then it will be harder to distinguish it for research purposes. As I will argue later, we can understand solitude as an exceptional state or as a part of everyday life – and these understandings are complementary, not exclusive. We have to assume, that we have access to past experiences and understanding of them – even in such a seemingly private matter. We may realize to what degree people were one with the solitude and to what degree they were conscious about it. As far as we are disconnected from the solitary part of our lives, we need more awareness of it in order to bring it back to its proper place. Then, we have to create a certain image of life that would include the experience of solitude as an everyday occurrence. We have no guarantee, that what worked “naturally” in the past will still work today after such detachment.

This leads us to the next step: we have to adapt our discoveries to a wide application. This means that we cannot just take something from

the past and applicate it without many changes. Perhaps the most important thing here is to make the matter of solitude more approachable – if we do not want to let it be for the chosen ones, who have enough self-knowledge to make it a part of their lives. In the end, we have to convince people. It is less the case for the “propaganda of solitude” or to make it “fashionable”; more like sneaking it into people’s lives. The ideal ending would be to make solitude such an obvious part of our everyday lives, that we may even stop problematizing it. The big change would include going from partial forgetfulness to partial forgetfulness – but in a radically different meaning. The first one means forgetfulness of the importance of solitude and detachment from it. The second means forgetfulness of solitude, as it becomes such an obvious part of our lives, that it is not a distinctive state anymore.

2. The dominant picture

There is a close connection between how we value things (positively or negatively), how **much** we value things (from importance to irrelevance), and how we perceive them (as something obvious or problematic). Speaking of logical implication would be too much, but we can see the relation between the positive, the important, and the obvious on the one side, and the negative, the irrelevant, and the problematic on the other.

Our present situation is dominated by the pictures of solitude as a forced (therefore negative) situation, which keeps us from functioning as we desire to (therefore problematic). At the same time, speaking and listening about it sounds tiring, depressing, and uninspiring (therefore irrelevant). Being problematic and irrelevant at the same time seems incompatible, but if we look at it as a defense tactic against the first, then we will instantly realize its obvious relation – and ineffectiveness of the tactic. The easiest way to deal with a problem is to ignore it, push it into the unconscious, postpone it for later, and wait for the situation to resolve itself. Before the pandemic, the “problem” of solitude looked more or less like a problem of the individual, therefore addressing it was not so urgent.

That is not true at all. The problem was there all along, only now we can see more vividly, that our connections with ourselves were poor, as the masks we put on were ripped off brutally. But instead of looking in the mirror – perhaps with fear or anxiety – we desperately try to glue these broken masks together. Should we blame ourselves? Blame for rejecting an inherent part of us for a long time, for not having enough

courage to face the solitude? Only partially. On the social level, we may blame ourselves for creating a culture of distraction, of favoring being in the world constantly, of promoting the expansion of our "I". But on the other hand, we cannot exaggerate our agency as a society, and we cannot be blamed for not being ideal. Problems on a social level will always arise and the issue is, how we deal with them when they become clear enough. If we fail to deal with them from now on, then the full blame is on us.

On the individual level, we can show a similar pattern. We cannot take our agency, but we also cannot exaggerate it. Yet, as we are acutely aware of our problematic attitude towards solitude, we cannot put the whole blame on external forces, because the question of solitude is one of the most private things we can imagine. At least to this extent, we may agree with Sartre talking about the "human condition" as a set of limitations that "*a priori* define man's fundamental situation in the universe",¹ but also, that despite human historical (or private) situation "what never varies is the necessity for him to be in the world, to work in it, to live out his life in it among others, and, eventually, to die in it".² The most private aspects of our lives are the ones that we cannot ignore, neglect, and set aside, as they are with us the most. There are things which we cannot share with anyone at all; therefore, they can be and are experienced only in seclusion – even, when we are among other people. Of course, the clearest example would be the experience of our own death, as Heidegger senses us: "*No one can take the other's dying away from him [...] Every Dasein itself must take dying upon itself in every instance. Insofar as it 'is', death is always essentially my own*".³ Whether death or solitude, we can talk about it and experience its manifestations in the world, but this external aspect has its limitations:

The publicness of everyday being-with-one-another "knows" death as a constantly occurring event, as a "case of death." Someone or another "dies," be it a neighbor or a stranger. People unknown to us "die" daily and hourly. "Death" is encountered as a familiar event occurring within the world. As such, it remains in the inconspicuousness characteristic of everyday encounters. The they has also already secured an interpretation for this event. The

¹ Jean Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is A Humanism*, transl. by Carol Macomber (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2007), 42.

² *Ibidem*.

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. by Joan Stambaugh (New York: State University of New York Press, 2010), 231.

“fleeting” talk about this, which is either expressed or else mostly kept back, says: one also dies at the end, but for now one is not affected [*unbetroffen*].⁴

As much as we are bombarded with the occurrence of death – be it in statistics, media, or even individual deaths of our relatives – they are so distinct from the experience of our death, that some may say, we cannot learn anything from someone else’s death in order to prepare for our own. If existence is truly Being-toward-Death, if it is inscribed in our existence, so is the solitude. But the question of solitude leaves us in a better position. We cannot experience death until the very end of our life – thus greatly reducing our understanding of it – but we can learn a lot about solitude – not only in a limited way from others, but also from ourselves, and benefit from it for the rest of our life. Ultimately, solitude is tied to the understanding of ourselves, and that is tied to our happiness or well-being. As much as we live in times oriented around happiness, we feel that we are not good at actually achieving it. And as much as we problematize this aspect from the economical perspective (which is critical) we underestimate this aspect of living at peace with ourselves.

3. The flow of solitude

This is where normalizing solitude becomes so important. As for now, getting in touch with our inner selves seems like a difficult and demanding task, as work we have to do. And we do not want more work in our lives – we want less (or at least we seek work that inspires us). For many of us, this “inner job” does not seem inspiring at all. At best, it is a means to an end, which we have to go through. Precisely because we see it as something separate from our everyday lives. Solitude (especially the forced one) feels like it uproots us from the experience that we want to stay in. As long as we do not feel like it is a normal state, we cannot truly benefit from it, or the benefits are limited and achieved with great effort.

Let me compare it to a flow state. It is:

a state of optimal experience arising from intense involvement in an activity that is enjoyable, such as playing a sport, performing a musical passage, or writing a creative piece. Flow arises when one’s skills are fully utilized yet equal to the demands of the task, intrinsic motivation is at a peak, one loses self-consciousness and temporal awareness, and one has a sense of total con-

⁴ Ibidem, 243.

trol, effortlessness, and complete concentration on the immediate situation (the here and now).⁵

What interests us in this analogy is that flow is something we often experience spontaneously, take for granted, and benefit from it right away. We do not problematize it much – most of us are at most vaguely aware, that we were sometimes so productively focused on what we were doing, that the world outside of it basically did not exist for us. Yet, when the solitude “starts happening”, we immediately begin to feel uncomfortable – we seek distractions, not wanting to see what will happen if we let this solitary state “work” in us. The more we react this way, the more we “hide under the rug”, and the more we do not want to deal with it, as it becomes more and more problematic. Therefore, rejecting solitude leads to a gradual build-up of everything that we do not want to have contact with. But things start to come out from it and they become even nastier than before. And instead of dealing with the problem, we start to deal with the symptoms. Nasty as they are, they prevent us even more from digging inside, as the fear of what is there grows. The circle closes.

The state of solitude should resemble a flow state more – involvement should be 1) if not always enjoyable, at least more neutral; 2) less self-conscious, but also with a better sense of control; 3) effortless, as the effort often comes from fighting or running from it.

4. The experience of “true” solitude

Let us step back for a moment to mention Henry David Thoreau – a true titan of solitude. If we think about solitude more radically – as Thoreau did – we may conclude, that we do not experience solitude nowadays at all. Such experience requires much more than just a feeling of being alone and sitting in our homes. Actual solitary experience is out there in vast spaces, barely touched by human hands, ideally, in the wilderness. We can find at least two meanings of solitude in *The Maine Woods*. Solitude can be seen more as a place that affects us, rather than our experience of the world and ourselves: “strokes of a woodchopper’s axe, echo-

⁵ Definition from American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology: “Flow”, access 19.07.2021, <https://dictionary.apa.org/flow>.

ing dully through the grim solitude";⁶ or as a quality of a place "could not one spend some weeks or years in the solitude of this vast wilderness with other employments than these, -- employments perfectly sweet and innocent and ennobling?"⁷

Following the first understanding, we may come to the conclusion, that it has not much to do with our situation, for many reasons. Our solitude is tight, crowded, and filled with human creations. Yet, Thoreau tells us something more:

We are wont to liken many sounds, heard at a distance in the forest, to the stroke of an axe, because they resemble each other under those circumstances, and that is the one we commonly hear there. When we told Joe of this, he exclaimed, "By George, I'll bet that was moose! They make a noise like that." These sounds affected us strangely, and by their very resemblance to a familiar one, where they probably had so different an origin, enhanced the impression of solitude and wildness.⁸

What enabled that enhancement was losing the touch with what is familiar, filling such a deficiency with similarities, coupled with the awareness of being something else. And that has more to do with our situation. The restrictions imposed on us forced us to lose the touch with familiar things and to seek alternatives, more or less intentionally – and we are fully aware, that such alternatives are just to resemble the original. Thus, solitude comes from experiencing a contrast, and not just from losing contact with what we know. That would lead us to be lost. Solitude (understood more as "being on your own") and being lost are often mixed with each other as they often coexist and interact. We may find ourselves in a foreign city, feeling alone and lost, treating these experiences as one. However, we may as well be lost with our close companion, and we may be on our own in known territory. Not to mention that solitude should be understood wider than that – as far as "being alone" and "being on your own" may be a part of it.

If we think about solitude as a quality, like in "solitude of wilderness" and not stick so much to Thoreau's thinking, we may realize, that there is no limitation in terms of specific places. Montaigne encouraged us to find or create a private place, where we can truly be alone, to get

⁶ Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods: A Fully Annotated Edition* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2009), 92.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 111.

⁸ *Ibidem*, 92.

a chance to genuinely reconnect with ourselves and experience all the benefits related to it:

We should have wives, children, property, and, above all, good health ... if we can: but we should not become so attached to them that our happiness depends on them. We should set aside a room, just for ourselves, at the back of the shop, keeping it entirely free and establishing there our true liberty, our principal solitude and asylum. Within it our normal conversation should be of ourselves, with ourselves, so privy that no commerce or communication with the outside world should find a place there; there we should talk and laugh as though we had no wife, no children, no possessions, no followers, no menservants, so that when the occasion arises that we must lose them it should not be a new experience to do without them. We have a soul able to turn in on herself; she can keep herself company; she has the wherewithal to attack; to defend; to receive and to give. Let us not fear that in such a solitude as that we shall be crouching in painful idleness.⁹

But as useful as it may be, it is again about conscious entering and leaving the seclusion, just like Thoreau, but on a small scale. Does the experience of actual solitude always presuppose such transitions?

What I intend to show is that these classical philosophers are examples of a well-worn scheme of thinking about solitude – as an effort, a radical (and temporal) change in the way we experience and think. It creates sharp dichotomies between the private and the public, the exceptional and the common – the list goes on. It is not about them being wrong – it is about making us think, that in everyday life we should not experience solitude, but we should intentionally make a place for an exceptional state in our lives. This leads to a negative perception of any manifestation of solitude, which is not directly controlled by us. It is shredding our experience into different modes that we enter and exit instead of showing its wholeness. Ultimately, this leads to solitude being embraced by a few and rejected by the most.

5. From exception to usualness

The task for the vanguard of solitude is to break this vicious circle. This can be done only if we start to treat solitude not as an exceptional state, not as a state, in which we can “work with ourselves” and not as a state, in which there are only challenges, problems, and detachment from eve-

⁹ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, transl. by Michael Andrew Screech (London–New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 155.

ryday life that we value that much, but as a part of our everyday life, as something obvious and neutral. Positive aspects of solitude are known and promoted, but focusing on them so much enforces it as something unique, something we should always enter consciously and with a specific goal. This leads to treating every unexpected experience of seclusion as an invasion on our not-secluded everyday life that we have to deal with, either by rejecting or embracing it. It becomes something we have to refer to every time, something we cannot take for granted and live it. It resembles a situation of sudden idleness, in which we punish ourselves for not doing anything, instead of just letting it be. It leads – at least partially – to force us to live consciously all the time – what, in a stoic manner some may argue, is a good thing. But such a fully conscious life would be a nightmare, and our organisms understand that very well.¹⁰ The breaks are at least as important as the effort – a lesson from bodybuilders, who spend more time resting than exercising, as that is the actual time when the human body grows and regenerates. So, in short, we should advocate not for solitude as exceptionally beneficial in the first place, but as something as important as idleness – as an inherent part of our lives, that we **do not have to problematize**. The effort should come **after** incorporating the solitude as it is; the incorporation should not be the effect of great effort. So, the order of how we may intuitively think about it is reversed. Only after achieving this, we can go further and make the most of its possibilities.

6. The case of associations – new vocabulary

Loneliness, being an unfortunate synonym for solitude, indicates sadness from not having company. Such synonyms undermine every effort to valorize solitude. Even when we get acutely aware of differences, we cannot get rid of this negative bias that floats around it. To counterbalance it, we have to consciously think of some positive aspects of being solitary.

This brings us to the task of creating new vocabulary. I do not mean it in the exact same way as Rorty does and surely, I do not want to dig into his epistemological claims. But yes – just like with Rorty, the case is to offer an alternative, and to replace one with another, to some extent.

¹⁰ Popular example wants us to imagine a beginner driver, who is constantly aware of everything he does to steer a car, and an experienced driver, who does the same without even a thought about what is happening with him right now.

And yes, it is about making it look more attractive – otherwise, it will not fit our everyday discourse.¹¹ Not only do we have to dig into the descriptions of experiences of solitude from the past and translate them into more approachable and convincing language, but perhaps we have to invent a whole new vocabulary deprived of the connotations that hold us back from achieving our goal of bringing solitude back to our lives. It is about providing us “with a vocabulary which is all its own, cleansing it of the residues of a vocabulary which was suited to the needs of former days”.¹² I am talking about a dictionary – not words – deliberately, as I do not believe, that a mere change of words would be enough. It is necessary – but it will not suffice.

I am fully aware of the vagueness of this postulate. But to describe the future language that we will harness to discuss this or any other specific topic; language, that is yet to emerge, seems like an impossible task – at least at this very beginning stage. As Rorty follows the Wittgensteinian analogy between tools and vocabularies, he points out, that “by contrast, the creation of a new form of cultural life, a new vocabulary, will have its utility explained only retrospectively. We cannot see [...] [it] as a tool while we are still in the course of figuring out how to use it. For there are as yet no clearly formulatable ends to which it is a means”.¹³ This is what distinguishes us from Rorty – we have a clearly formulated end.

However, the emphasis on vocabulary is also to underline the scale of changes that must be done to actually make a difference. The question of solitude is in direct relation to how we act, imagine and think about our lives; therefore, it would become a prologue for much broader considerations. Thus, the task before us is to engage both imagination and language. Furthermore, perhaps we (and I think about philosophers in the first place) may have to do it by deceit. But what does it mean?

I think that philosophers are masters of deception. They may (and often do) tell us things that were said hundreds of times – but in such a manner, that we do not realize it, or at least we vaguely feel that there must be something new here. The more people cease to value tradition and the past and the more freely they treat them, the more philosopher’s job is to disguise, that he is revealing something that was already there, and to show it as something fresh, new, carefully tailored to our time.

¹¹ Cf. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 9.

¹² *Ibidem*, 55.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

Of course, it is not that we are not inventing anything new or that the past holds all the keys to the present and the future. My argument is limited to that one fact, that solitude has a bad reputation because of its connotations inherited from the past and from our language; therefore, the effort of a philosopher would be to smuggle what is valuable in such packaging, that we will not fully realize what it really is. Only for this reason we should create our own – more or less innovative – thoughts concerning solitude. Otherwise, we shall keep losing battle for an important part of the human experience.

My task here is not to present such new vocabulary, but to indicate its necessity. It does not mean, that we will forget our present vocabulary, but that it may be used to speak in different contexts. We may still experience loneliness and speak about it as we do it now, but we may have a different language to speak about the state of solitude devoid of its present, fuzzy meaning. Efforts to portray it in a positive light have not achieved the intended goal – perhaps it is time for a different approach.

7. Appendix: Exploring the most individual

As much as philosophy is concerned with an individual and its relation to the “major questions” such as free will, absolute, nature, or society, there are areas of “minor questions”, which could be explored more. “Minor” does not indicate their little importance, but rather the scope of those questions. In a hermeneutical manner, they may lead us back to the more general issues, giving us a unique perspective, which may not be so clear, when we start our investigations the other way around.

It seems almost paradoxical, that when we attempt to problematize solitude, we immediately start looking for connections – as if what is truly “private” or “separate” does not exist. Our own language pushes us into such relations, and our thinking and acting are shaped in such a way that we cannot do otherwise – so the “exploration” of different issues is not so much “digging into” but rather “creating/figuring out links”. Speaking in a broader sense, even differentiation falls under such an unending chain (or rather network). We can think of separation as a kind of relationship between two or more things that are defined by negation or contrast. Therefore, we can think about solitude as a negative ideal that is never fully achieved, but in reality, is more a matter of gradability. This gives us a possibility to consider every aspect of it from a perspective, in which we ask ourselves whether and how close it brings us to this ideal (which we probably do not want to reach).

In the context of solitude, we can therefore think about different variations of “self-” and “auto-”, such as self-love, self-intimacy, autoeroticism, and so on. Today, such questions are often addressed by psychology. As much as philosophers are comfortable with entering the competence of sociology, they are not that comfortable when it comes to psychology (perhaps it is the aftermath of the critique of psychologism in philosophy?). That is a territory that can and should be regained.

Here, we can explore some of the most provocative matters (and I believe, philosophers are people most fond of being provocative) like the question of masturbation. We can see some examples of such attempts in the works of Damon A. Young¹⁴ or Alan Soble.¹⁵ Young investigates this topic in the context of Karl Marx and Martin Heidegger, where the latter is used to correct the former, as Marx compares philosophy to masturbation and therefore mischaracterizes the last one (or both). Masturbation is shown by Young as not so private and not so impractical, as it may originally indicate. On the other hand, Soble investigates masturbation in a series of issues, such as the criterion of masturbation in the light of Kant, the pleas of being perverted (Thomas Nagel) or “empty” sexuality (Robert Salomon), the cultural standards of masturbation and much more. Repeating myself, these are just some examples of issues of what can be done about them and how to approach such topics. Obviously, I cannot give a full list of such questions and relations when it comes to the question of solitude. But there is surely plenty of room for creativity. And it is not merely about being creative or provocative – it is about the human in its private, not left alone with its privateness.

Perhaps it is more important than we think.

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¹⁴ Damon A. Young, “Knowing Thyself... in Private: Masturbation and Philosophy”, *Sexuality and Culture* 9 (2005): 58–79.

¹⁵ Alan Soble, “Masturbation: Conceptual and Ethical Matters”, in: *The Philosophy of Sex. Contemporary Readings*, ed. Alan Soble (Lanham–Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Press, 2002), 67–94.

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Summary

The pandemic situation showed us, that separation from other people is an important part of our lives and makes even more impact than we thought. Yet, the dominant picture of this separation is hugely negative and was so for a long time. Solitude, being nor positive nor negative on its own, just as being with others, is not something that people as a whole acknowledge in their lives – it is perceived as a state to endure, something that can be useful, but not something we should just live with, at least partially. This paper shows how important it is to create a new picture of solitude – as something normal, not exceptional. It indicates the task to create a new vocabulary around the phenomenon of solitude, free of its negative connotations, which will enable us to incorporate solitude back into our lives. I argue, that such a change in vocabulary may enable us normalization of solitude and that such normalization should be our goal.

Keywords: solitude, normalization, vocabulary, language, experience, Richard Rorty