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# Loneliness, Solitude, and Philosophic Contemplation

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## Abstract

Creating conditions that facilitate sociality and friendship is an important way to address loneliness. But it is not sufficient in itself, as shown by philosopher Anca Gheaus in a recent article. After highlighting the need for alternative ways to address chronic loneliness, Gheaus offers a promising approach: “[c]reating favourable conditions for the appreciation of solitude [...]” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 242). In this article, I first expand Gheaus’ account by articulating different dimensions of solitude experiences. Second, I show how cultivation of philosophic contemplation could enhance one’s ability to appreciate solitude.

## Résumé

Créer des conditions qui facilitent la sociabilité et l’amitié est un moyen important de lutter contre l’isolement social. Mais cela n’est pas suffisant en soi, comme l’a montré la philosophe Anca Gheaus dans un article récent. Après avoir souligné la nécessité de trouver des approches alternatives pour faire face à l’isolement social chronique, Gheaus propose une approche prometteuse : « créer des conditions favorables à l’appréciation de la solitude [...] » (Gheaus, 2022, p. 242). Dans cet article, j’élargis d’abord l’analyse de Gheaus en articulant différentes dimensions des expériences de solitude. Ensuite, je montre comment la pratique de la contemplation philosophique pourrait renforcer la capacité de chacun à apprécier la solitude.

**Keywords:** loneliness; solitude; philosophic contemplation; ethics; wellbeing; Aristotle; Bertrand Russell

## 1. Introduction

Scholars and practitioners have expressed growing concern about loneliness and lack of social connection for more than 70 years (see, for instance, Hertz, 2021; Putnam, 2000, 2003; Riesman, 1950). That rising tide of concern has recently become a torrent.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, loneliness is now recognized as a

<sup>1</sup> According to the May 2021 *American Perspectives Survey* on friendship patterns in the United States, for instance, Americans are increasingly lonely and isolated and have been experiencing a friendship recession,

serious problem in public health, even prompting the U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy to release an advisory in 2023 addressing the “epidemic of loneliness and isolation” affecting the country. In Murthy’s words, “[l]oneliness is far more than just a bad feeling — it harms both individual and societal health” (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). Loneliness is also one of the central themes in philosopher Kieran Setiya’s recent book, *Life is hard: How Philosophy Can Help Us Find Our Way*, wherein he devotes the second chapter to exploring the harm of loneliness, how it feels to be lonely, and why it hurts in order to understand what that pain tells us about how to live. In Setiya’s view, lonely people miss friends and thereby experience a sense of vanishing; for “[w]hen we are friendless, our value goes unrealized. Our worth as a human being is unappreciated, unengaged” (Setiya, 2022, p. 57).

Given that loneliness undermines both individual and social wellbeing in significant ways, what are we to do about it? After noting the absence of adequate social services to address loneliness, Setiya answers this question by emphasizing the importance of “friendship [which] can begin with the simple act of paying attention” (Setiya, 2022, p. 63) to other people. Murthy, however, proposes a framework for a “National Strategy to Advance Social Connection,” which consists of six pillars including strengthening social infrastructure in local communities, enacting pro-connection public policies, and cultivating a culture of connection, among others (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023).<sup>2</sup> Creating conditions that facilitate sociality, social connections, and friendship is an important and perhaps obvious way to address loneliness. But it is not sufficient in itself, as shown by philosopher Anca Gheaus in a recent article. According to Gheaus, since people can suffer loneliness even in the company of others and while leading socially active lives, “[m]ore than the mere company of others is needed to alleviate loneliness” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 242).<sup>3</sup> After highlighting the need for alternative ways to address chronic loneliness, Gheaus offers a promising approach: “[c]reating favourable conditions for the appreciation of solitude [ . . . ]” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 242). According to this approach, “being capable of happy solitude has particular value in the prevention of chronic loneliness” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 242).

In focusing on solitude and its relation to human wellbeing, Gheaus engages with an important topic that has been underexamined by contemporary philosophers and deserves more attention.<sup>4</sup> David Velleman, who is one of the few philosophers to address this topic, counts solitude as one of the functions that are characteristic of persons and describes taking pleasure in solitude as one of the ways of valuing

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which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to this survey, 12% now say they do not have close friendships, compared to 3% in 1990. Almost 50% said they lost contact with friends during the COVID-19 pandemic. See Cox (2021) for a report on the findings of this survey. According to a widely cited sociology article by McPherson et al. (2006), the number of people reporting that they have no one with whom to discuss important matters nearly tripled from 1985 to 2004. Interestingly, however, Fischer (2009) showed that this study was based on faulty data. My article does not draw inferences from these data.

<sup>2</sup> The remaining three pillars are: Mobilize the Health Sector, Reform Digital Environments, and Deepen our Knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> Setiya also acknowledges this by saying that “[o]ne can be by oneself, in quiet solitude, without feeling lonely; and one can be lonely in a crowd” (Setiya, 2022, p. 41). Yet, he does not elaborate on solitude as Gheaus does.

<sup>4</sup> Among important exceptions are Arendt (1953) and Velleman (2015). I will invoke the views of both in this article.

personhood, which, in turn, is a part of human nature. If solitude is a “distinctively human way of being alone” (Velleman, 2015, p. 110), as Velleman says, then having a better understanding of what it is and conditions for taking pleasure in it could tell us a great deal about who we are and how we are to live as human beings, thereby complementing what we learn from understanding the pain of loneliness, as Setiya suggests (Setiya, 2022, p. 46). Given this and the aforementioned negative impact of loneliness on our wellbeing, considering what lessons “a proper appreciation of solitude” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 234) may offer for combatting loneliness, as Gheaus proposes, is a worthwhile task. In this article, I contribute to this task in two ways. First, I expand Gheaus’ account by articulating different dimensions of solitude experiences. Second, I show how cultivation of philosophic contemplation could enhance one’s ability to appreciate solitude.

In regard to the first contribution, Gheaus follows a broad, dictionary definition of solitude, understanding it to be the state of being alone. However, due to its broadness, this definition is limited in capturing what “happy solitude” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 242) entails or what it means to take pleasure in solitude. To better comprehend these aspects and understand what “a proper appreciation of solitude” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 234) may offer for combatting loneliness, a more nuanced understanding of solitude experiences is necessary. To this end, in Section 3, I present different dimensions of solitude experiences by drawing on what Gheaus calls “the Arendt-Velleman view” of solitude (Gheaus, 2022, p. 237), as well as recent work by psychologists James Averill and Louise Sundararajan on what they call *authentic solitude* — a chosen state of being alone that is deeply relational (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014). For the purposes of this article, the key aspect of authentic solitude is that it unfolds in a mental space distinct from the physical and social realities of everyday life, wherein one relates to oneself and others in a way that differs from how we ordinarily do.

Having presented different dimensions of solitude experiences, with a particular focus on the mental space associated with authentic solitude, I turn to the second contribution. I argue in Section 4 that one’s ability to think in a particular way — that is, to engage in philosophic contemplation — can influence one’s ability to experience and enjoy solitude by enabling the creation of such a mental space. Drawing on Aristotle’s and Bertrand Russell’s accounts of philosophic contemplation, I argue that philosophic contemplation may provide individuals with a peculiarly useful mental space by expanding their scope of interests beyond humanity and the narrow circle of personal aims within it. Philosophic contemplation could thereby help reduce feelings of loneliness for some people by satisfying their need for relatedness and reducing their desire for social interaction, providing them with a different source of satisfaction. Consequently, it could enable them to enjoy their own company and prefer it to unsatisfying relationships that may give rise to loneliness, even though it does not always thereby enhance their capacity for friendship and genuine emotional connection with others. I begin by presenting the main tenets of Gheaus’ account.

## 2. Gheaus’ Proposal

Gheaus describes the purpose of her article as “a plea for learning to value solitude broadly conceived” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 235), which she takes to be the state of being

alone.<sup>5</sup> While she prefers to use this broad, dictionary definition of solitude in her article, when it comes to loneliness, she follows the psychological literature and takes loneliness to “mean a negative emotional reaction — of sadness, or even grief — at the fact of not having the desired level of emotional connection with others” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 236). Driven by her conviction that solitude has an important, albeit underexamined, role to play in the ethics and politics of sociability, Gheaus offers the following argument regarding the protection it offers against loneliness:

[...] the ability to endure solitude protects against loneliness, and the ability to take pleasure in it even more so. Since loneliness significantly detracts from individual wellbeing, solitude is valuable to human flourishing. More ambitiously, I advance the (empirical) claim that an inability to appreciate solitude puts one at high risk of loneliness. (Gheaus, 2022, pp. 234–235)

In this passage (and several others), Gheaus acknowledges that there is a difference between the ability to *endure* or *stand* solitude and the ability to *take pleasure in* or *enjoy* solitude. On her account, while the enjoyment of solitude is “incompatible with loneliness” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 245), “[t]he mere acceptance of solitude as a necessary price for accomplishing work, or better self-understanding or emotional self-control, is compatible with loneliness” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 245). However, being able to accept solitude as a necessary price for accomplishing certain activities is important. This is because, to the extent that “one is capable of the activities for which she needs to be alone, she is protected from the despondency that extreme loneliness entails” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 245). Furthermore, “[f]or individuals who find value in solitude, periods of loneliness are less taxing” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 245). Thus, according to Gheaus’ account, a proper appreciation of solitude involves not just the capacity to be alone, but also valuing and, ideally, finding fulfilment in one’s own company. Whereas the ability to *stand* being alone and carry out the activities that requires being alone is important and protects against loneliness to a certain extent, the ability to *enjoy* solitude or, as Gheaus says, being capable of *happy* solitude is a much more effective way of preventing chronic loneliness on her account.

Gheaus presents us with the following suggestions regarding how to cultivate an appreciation for solitude:

[...] we ought to provide small children with the psychological wherewithal to tolerate solitude [through secure attachment patterns], to teach older ones to enjoy it, and, possibly, to provide people with protected “me time”, by removing social stigma associated with voluntary solitude. (Gheaus, 2022, p. 249)

Being capable of voluntary solitude is important; it allows us to be able to be without others and, thereby, protects against loneliness, which, on Gheaus account, is

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<sup>5</sup> In doing this, Gheaus (2022, p. 235) follows the definition offered by some dictionaries. Throughout her article, rather than giving an account of “what solitude, or loneliness, ‘really’ is” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 235), Gheaus chooses to work with understandings of these terms that are “more or less in line with (some) everyday uses of the terms” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 235).

essentially due to a lack of satisfying relations and emotional connection. Having noted that one can feel lonely even in the company of others, Gheaus adds that being around people with whom we lack an emotional connection might actually worsen feelings of loneliness, rather than protect against it. So, in order to avoid loneliness, it is important to choose to be alone and enjoy our alone time rather than “the company of people with whom one cannot establish fulfilling relationships” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 249). Gheaus thereby presents cultivating an appreciation for solitude, “both as an alternative to unsatisfying relations and as a perhaps necessary condition for genuine emotional connection” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 249). As she concludes her article, “[t]o be with others, we must also be able to be without them” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 249).

Gheaus’ normative conclusions and suggestions regarding how to cultivate an appreciation for solitude are important and compelling in terms of their implications for ethics of sociability. In Section 4, I propose an additional way through which one may cultivate an appreciation for solitude — that is, *via* fostering philosophic contemplation. But first I will elaborate on different dimensions of solitude experiences so I can explain how philosophic contemplation relates to these dimensions.

### 3. Solitude Experiences

Notwithstanding her clear preference for a broad definition of solitude as the state of being alone, Gheaus engages with other, narrower senses of solitude in order to “cast light on what it can mean for someone to *enjoy* being alone” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 236, my italics). According to what she calls the *Arendt-Velleman view*, for instance, solitude is a state of keeping oneself company, wherein one has objective self-conception in that one is aware of being by oneself (Gheaus, 2022, p. 237).<sup>6</sup> Gheaus finds the Arendt-Velleman view definitionally inadequate due to the demandingness of the objective self-awareness requirement — that is, “because solitude in the basic sense of being alone can be valuable even when one lacks the objective self-awareness required by the Arendt-Velleman sense of solitude” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 238).<sup>7</sup> Despite this, she invokes the concept of *happy* solitude for the first time and predominantly in relation to her assessment of the Arendt-Velleman view. Right after stating that she does not consider it an adequate view of solitude for the purposes of her article, she adds:

But it is helpful as an account of one particularly important kind of *happy* solitude, one that is necessary for effective sociability [...] it is helpful as an account of one kind of solitude because the ability to be happy with *this* sort of solitude — that is, the ability to enjoy one’s own company — is essential for combatting loneliness. (Gheaus, 2022, p. 238)

<sup>6</sup> According to what she calls *solitude as contentment with being alone view*, however, “solitude is not merely being alone, but being so without minding it” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 238). Unlike the Arendt-Velleman view, *solitude as contentment with being alone view* does not require one to have self-awareness.

<sup>7</sup> Gheaus also thinks that the Arendt-Velleman view seems definitionally inadequate because it fails to capture some instances of solitude as identified by everyday parlance (Gheaus, 2022, p. 238).

I agree with Gheaus that the requirement to have self-awareness might be too rigid a criterion to define solitude *per se*. However, when it comes to describing what it means to take pleasure in solitude and highlighting the importance of *choosing* to be alone, invoking one's relation to oneself and one's capacity for being company to oneself is important. After all, if one is simply caught in the flow of an activity without being aware of oneself, even though one can be said to be alone during that time, one cannot really be said to have chosen to be alone, nor to be enjoying alone time *per se*. Enjoying one's own company and preferring it to unsatisfying relations requires an awareness of being by oneself. I thus agree with Velleman who, drawing on Hannah Arendt's views on solitude, states that "[t]he pleasure of solitude comes from simply contemplating one's capacity for being company to someone — in this case, oneself" (Velleman, 2015, p. 116). As Velleman clarifies, this pleasure does not come from "finding oneself entertaining" (Velleman, 2015, p. 116) or continuously thinking about oneself. Rather than self-directed attention, it comes from an objective self-awareness of keeping oneself company and choosing to do so.

The Arendt-Velleman view of solitude highlights an important dimension of solitude experiences by focusing on one's relation to oneself. But relational dimensions of solitude experiences are not limited to this inner-directed or self-to-self dimension. As psychologists Averill and Sundararajan argue, solitude experiences also have an outer-directed or self-to-other dimension when what is at stake is what they call *authentic solitude*. Before explaining what the outer-directed dimension of authentic solitude is, I need to explain what Averill and Sundararajan mean by authentic solitude. They introduce this notion by distinguishing it from what they call *pseudo solitude*, while they focus primarily on "potential benefits of solitude, as opposed to loneliness" (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014, p. 91). According to the distinction they draw based on the subjective quality of the alone time, *pseudo solitude* is a state of being alone in which one feels alienated from oneself and others. In this state, the dominant feeling is loneliness and it "involves a sense of abandonment or unwanted isolation" (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014, p. 91). *Authentic solitude*, by contrast, is conceptualized as a positive experience in that it consists in a desired and chosen state of being alone that is deeply relational.

Importantly, even though there is also a non-relational dimension of authentic solitude manifested by occasional feelings of loneliness, loneliness in authentic solitude is never immoderate. Instead, relational dimensions (inner-directed and outer-directed) take precedence over loneliness. The inner-directed dimension of authentic solitude focuses on the relation with oneself, including aspects such as self-care, self-discovery, self-enrichment, empowerment, and creativity, which are made possible by the freedom that comes from releasing oneself from societal and familial obligations (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014, pp. 101–102). The outer-directed dimension, meanwhile, focuses on the ways in which one can feel connected to *others* when one is alone. In Averill and Sundararajan's words, "[t]his dimension can extend from closeness to another person who is absent to identification with a social group or community and to a spiritual feeling of oneness with the universe, God, or the Tao" (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014, p. 102). The *others* to whom one can feel connected when alone are thus not limited to other human beings. More specifically, the scope of the outer-directed relational dimension of authentic solitude is not

limited to a society of humans and society is not the only context that provides “possibilities for communion” (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014, p. 92). Among the other types of “construction[s] that humans make to serve their needs as relational beings [are] virtual communities with God, with nature, and even, on occasion, with inanimate objects” (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014, p. 92). In order for us to recognize these different “possibilities for communion while alone” (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014, p. 92) and actually experience authentic solitude, we need to consider our relationship with ourselves and others through a perspective that allows us to think and see beyond our ordinary ways. In Averill and Sundararajan’s words, “authentic solitude unfolds in a mental space or *designer environment* that is distinct from the physical and social realities of everyday life” (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014, p. 100).<sup>8</sup> This feature of authentic solitude will be particularly important in the next section.

As stated earlier, Gheaus considers the ability to enjoy one’s own company essential for combatting loneliness, which, on her account, is fundamentally due to a lack of satisfying relationships and emotional connection. Even though Gheaus does not invoke Averill and Sundararajan’s account of authentic solitude, this account can be helpfully used to exemplify what enjoying one’s own company may look like. In the case of authentic solitude, the ability to enjoy one’s own company is coupled with an ability to create a mental space, wherein one is distanced from the physical and social realities of everyday life, including unsatisfying relationships with other people, while still being connected to others, broadly conceived.

Averill and Sundararajan focus on the tradition of eremitism in China to illustrate the mental space or designer environment relevant to authentic solitude. They describe how hermits experience authentic solitude, wherein they are both free from social constraints and in communion with others including mountains, stones, and rocks thanks to the designer environment they create grounded in their animistic heritage from Taoism (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014, pp. 103–105; see also Rowley, 1974; and Sundararajan, 2009). According to their account, however, one need not live a life of hermitage and “retreat alone to the mountains in order to reap the benefits of solitude” (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014, p. 104), for it is possible to experience solitude vicariously through art and poetry rooted in the tradition of eremitism. While I find Averill and Sundararajan’s appeal to this tradition interesting, in my view, there is another, similarly fascinating paradigm to illustrate the mental space relevant to authentic solitude: philosophic contemplation.

#### 4. Philosophic Contemplation and Solitude

In this section, I suggest that philosophic contemplation could help create favourable conditions for appreciation of solitude to the extent that it provides a mental space that is distinct from narrow and personal aims of everyday life. Before I explain what is novel in my suggestion, it is important to point out that the idea that there is a

<sup>8</sup> As Averill and Sundararajan explain, humans construct and inhabit designer environments that are found only in cognitive space “[i]n contrast to natural habitats which are grounded in physical and social reality” (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014, p. 100). They consider designer environments as “the cognitive counterpart of niche construction by animals” (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014, p. 100).



connection between solitude and thinking in general is not a new one. Arendt, for instance, highlights this connection in order to distinguish solitude from loneliness, which she describes as “the experience of not belonging to the world at all” (Arendt, 1953, p. 323). Loneliness, in her view, has become a pervasive, everyday experience that paves the way to totalitarian domination by destroying “the space of solitude, which is a necessary condition for thinking” (Hill, 2021, p. 132).<sup>9</sup> For Arendt, “[w]hat makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one’s own self which can be realized in solitude [...]” (Arendt, 1953, p. 325). In contrast with loneliness, solitude entails keeping oneself company — a view that Velleman draws on, as seen earlier. In Arendt’s words:

In solitude [...] I am “by myself,” together with my self, and therefore two-in-one, whereas in loneliness I am actually one, deserted by all others. All thinking, strictly speaking, is done in solitude and is a dialogue between me and myself [...]. (Arendt, 1953, p. 324)

According to Arendt, one’s own self can be realized in solitude since, unlike loneliness, solitude creates space for the thinking activity — that is, engaging in a conversation with oneself.<sup>10</sup> In order to describe what it feels for her not to have such space, Arendt uses striking language in a letter that she wrote to her husband in 1955 during a period when she was a visiting lecturer at UC Berkeley: “I simply can’t be exposed to the public five times a week — in other words, never get out of the public eye. I feel as if I have to go around looking for myself” (Hill, 2020). For Arendt, then, not being able to spend time in solitude leads to the loss of herself, the ability to keep herself company, as well as the self-reflective space necessary for thinking.

In a powerful essay titled “The End of Solitude” (Deresiewicz, 2009) literary critic William Deresiewicz attributes a similar value to solitude and thus sees a similar problem in the loss of it. As he sees it, the loss of solitude and the rise of loneliness affecting, what he calls, the *Web generation* has to do with technology — particularly, instant messaging, the Internet, and social media. When “we live exclusively in relation to others” (Deresiewicz, 2009) feeling that we “can make [ourselves] fully known to one another” (Deresiewicz, 2009) through virtual platforms, Deresiewicz holds, what disappears from our lives is solitude, as well as our privacy and our concentration. In his words, “solitude enables us to secure the integrity of the self as well as to explore it” (Deresiewicz, 2009). Therefore, when we lose our ability to be

<sup>9</sup> According to Arendt’s account in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 1951), “[w]hat prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience.”

<sup>10</sup> In holding this conception of thinking, Arendt follows a long tradition, which goes all the way back to Plato’s seminal definition of thought as inner dialogue. Arendt mentions Epictetus as “the first to distinguish between loneliness and solitude” (Arendt, 1953, p. 324) and explains as follows:

As Epictetus sees it [...] the lonely man (*eremos*) finds himself surrounded by others with whom he cannot establish contact or to whose hostility he is exposed. The solitary man, on the contrary, is alone and therefore “can be together with himself” since men have the capacity of “talking with themselves.” (Arendt, 1953, p. 324).



alone, our capacity for solitude, we lose “the propensity for introspection, that examination of the self [...] placed at the center of spiritual life, of wisdom, of conduct” (Deresiewicz, 2009).

Arendt and Deresiewicz both, in my view, rightly hold that our ability to be alone (or lack thereof) significantly influences our ability to think with and for ourselves.<sup>11</sup> What I would like to suggest here is different from, yet complementary to, this view. As we have seen in the previous section, on Averill and Sundararajan’s account, authentic solitude unfolds in a mental space that is distinct from the physical and social realities of everyday life, wherein individuals relate to themselves and others differently than they ordinarily do. According to my view, one’s ability to think in a particular way — that is, one’s ability to engage in philosophic contemplation — can influence one’s ability to experience and enjoy solitude by providing such a mental space. In order to substantiate this proposal, first I need to clarify what I mean by *philosophic contemplation*. To this end, I turn to the respective accounts of two philosophers, Aristotle and Russell.

#### 4.1. Aristotle and Russell on Philosophic Contemplation

In order to have a sense of Aristotle’s account of philosophic contemplation, we need to briefly consider his view of the good life or happiness (*eudaimonia*) in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) and the distinction he makes between the life of contemplation (*theoria*)<sup>12</sup> and the life of practically oriented virtues within this context. After defining happiness as the virtuous activity of the soul in Book I and expounding on the life of practically oriented virtues in the first nine books, in Book X, he appears to break with this theme in suggesting that the life of contemplation is the perfect happiness or happiness in the primary degree, while the life of practically oriented virtues is instead merely secondary.<sup>13</sup> In Chapters 7 and 8 of Book X, he distinguishes these two kinds of lives by calling them *the life man will live insofar as something divine is present in him* and *the life man will live insofar as he is man* respectively. In what follows, I highlight a few of the relatively uncontroversial and interrelated features of Aristotle’s thought that ground this distinction.

What Aristotle calls the *secondary happiness* in Book X is the morally virtuous life that is grounded in practical wisdom (*phronesis*) — an intellectual virtue, which “is concerned with *things human* and things about which it is possible to deliberate” (NE1141b8–10, my italics).<sup>14</sup> According to Aristotle, we can deliberate *only* about matters that admit of being otherwise, i.e., what is contingent and not what is

<sup>11</sup> Storr also takes thinking to be a predominantly solitary activity and states that “[l]earning, thinking, innovation, and maintaining contact with one’s inner world are all facilitated by solitude” (Storr, 1988, p. 28).

<sup>12</sup> In what follows, I will be using *theoria* and *contemplation* interchangeably.

<sup>13</sup> There has been a long-standing debate over what some perceive as an ambivalence or inconsistency in Aristotle’s conception of happiness. In this article, I will not delve into the controversial issue as to whether there really is an inconsistency in Aristotle’s account of happiness. See Ackrill (1980); Hardie (1965); Kraut (1991); and Lear (2006) for some of the most influential works on this topic.

<sup>14</sup> All citations to Aristotle’s works including *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Metaphysics* are to J. Barnes’ *The complete works of Aristotle* (Aristotle, 1984).

necessary and invariable. Practical wisdom indicates the excellence of the deliberative rational part, which we can call the *human* aspect of our rationality that guides our appetites and passions,<sup>15</sup> and thereby grounds the formation of moral virtues such as generosity, courage, etc.<sup>16</sup> Practically wise individuals possess a keen perception that allows them to discern what is *beneficial* for themselves and for humanity as a whole. In Aristotle's words:

[...] it is thought to be the mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect [...] but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general. (NE1140a25–30)

The life of contemplation, by contrast, is grounded in *theoria*, which is the distinctive activity of the (most) divine element in us: the contemplative rational part or intellect (*nous*)<sup>17</sup> that contemplates the unchanging, necessary principles of the universe, rather than deliberate about things human that are contingent. According to Aristotle, *theoria* constitutes perfect happiness and surpasses all other activities in blessedness, for it is the most akin to the activity of God whose form is pure and without matter, and in a state of pure actuality.<sup>18</sup> Whereas the divine intellect is eternally thinking and contemplation is continuous for God, in human beings, contemplative activity is subject to choice, intermittence, and coupling with other activities. Yet it is still the best, most continuous, and most pleasant (NE1177a23) activity in which we can engage.

Aristotle's account of philosophic contemplation is built upon certain metaphysical commitments including his account of the soul, his separation between the divine and the human,<sup>19</sup> and his view of *theoria* as the paradigmatic activity of God. As I see it,

<sup>15</sup> According to Aristotle's partition of the soul, the soul has rational and non-rational parts. The non-rational part includes appetitive and nutritive parts, which we share with animals and plants respectively. The rational part is further divided into contemplative and deliberative parts (NE1139a1–15).

<sup>16</sup> According to Aristotle, practical wisdom comes about as a result of teaching and experience and one cannot be a morally virtuous person — that is, just, courageous, temperate, etc. [...] — without practical wisdom or (conversely) practically wise without being morally virtuous. This is due to the unity of the moral virtues and the practical wisdom as presented in NE, Book VI, 1144b30–32.

<sup>17</sup> According to Aristotle, *nous*, being the divine element in us, is superior to our composite nature, just as its activity is superior to moral virtue. Since moral virtues are in many ways bound up with the passions and the embodied soul, they belong to our composite nature. Although it is clear that, for Aristotle, the excellence of *nous* is a thing separate from the compound of body and soul (NE1178a24), he unfortunately has little to say about the nature of the activity and excellence of *nous*. Whether this notion of separability corresponds to that of the account of the separability and immortality of the agent intellect in *De anima*, is a subject of controversy. See, for instance, Caston (1999); Nagel (1980); Roche (1988); and Wedin (1993).

<sup>18</sup> Although Aristotle does not talk about the attributes of the divine intellect in *Nicomachean Ethics*, he does so in *Metaphysics* (Met.). According to this account, the divine intellect is separated from sensibles (Met.1073a4), impassible and unalterable (Met.1073a11), without matter (Met.1074a33–34), actuality (Met.1072a25–26, Met.1072b27–28), most honourable (Met.1074a26), the same as its object (Met.1075a1–5), prior in time to capacity (Met.1072b25), eternal (Met.1072a25, Met.1073a4), and the necessary condition of everything (Met.1072b13–14).

<sup>19</sup> As Aubenque puts it “[t]he fundamental intuition of Aristotle is the separation, the incommensurable distance between man and God” (Aubenque, 2002, p. 81, my translation).

however, we do not need to share these commitments in order to find some of the more general features of philosophic contemplation relevant for our purposes. For instance, according to Aristotle, *theoria* concerns disinterested pursuit of truth, rather than what is expedient to us; it aims at no end besides itself (NEX.7 1177b2–3, 1177b20; see also NE1141b3–9) and does not seek to achieve any outcome that might be hindered by misfortune or a lack of tools. Consequently, it is as independent and self-sufficient (NE1176b5, 1177a27, 1177b21) as any human activity can be.<sup>20</sup> In Aristotle's words:

Self-sufficiency will belong most to the activity of contemplation. For the philosopher, the just individual, and **all the rest equally need the necessities of life**, but once these are adequately supplied for all, the just individual will still need people towards whom and with whom he might act justly, and likewise for the temperate, the brave, and the others. **But the philosopher can engage in contemplation by himself, and all the more so the wiser he is.** He will perhaps do this better with colleagues around, but he remains the most self-sufficient all the same. (NEX.7 1177a27–b1, my emphasis)

Here Aristotle singles out the activity of contemplation for its self-sufficiency. For the successful performance of this activity “depends more on ourselves and less on fortuitous external circumstances” (Gasser-Wingate, 2020, p. 21) including other people, than the successful execution of morally virtuous deeds. This relative freedom from the contingencies and variable conditions of life enables philosophers to remain as self-sufficient (*autarkes*) as a human being can be and think by themselves — that is, in solitude.

Aristotle's account of philosophic contemplation presents us with an example of the kind of thinking that unfolds in a mental space that is distinct from the physical and social realities of everyday life or *things human* as Aristotle would say. In order to occupy this space and contemplate the unchanging, necessary principles of the universe, the philosopher does not need many external things beyond the necessities of life. Whereas practical thinking is invaluable in deliberating about and choosing among the various courses of action in life, which, in turn shape our character, it lacks the kind of mental space and relative independence from external things that contemplative thinking offers.

Centuries after Aristotle, Russell presents us with a similar appraisal of philosophic contemplation as seen in the following excerpt, wherein he examines the value of philosophy:

Apart from its utility in showing unsuspected possibilities, **philosophy has a value — perhaps its chief value — through the greatness of the objects which it contemplates, and the freedom from narrow and personal aims resulting from this contemplation** [...]. Philosophic contemplation does not, in its widest survey, divide the universe into two hostile camps — friends and foes,

<sup>20</sup> For an excellent account of Aristotle's views on self-sufficiency in relation to contemplation, see Gasser-Wingate (2020).

helpful and hostile, good and bad — **it views the whole impartially. Philosophic contemplation, when it is unalloyed, does not aim at proving that the rest of the universe is akin to humanity** [...]. (Russell, 1912, pp. 244–245, my emphasis)

According to Russell, rather than focusing on narrow and personal goals and/or endorsing a human-centric perspective, philosophic contemplation offers a mental space through which we can “enlarge our interests as to include the whole outer world” (Russell, 1912, p. 244), view the whole universe impartially, and attain a calm state that is devoid of the constant strife of “the private world of instinctive interests” (Russell, 1912, p. 244). In order to highlight the value of philosophic contemplation, he contrasts the philosophic life to what he calls *the life of the instinctive person* as follows:

The life of the instinctive person is shut up within the circle of his private interests [...]. **In such a life there is something feverish and confined, in comparison with which the philosophic life is calm and free.** The private world of instinctive interests is a small one, set in the midst of a great and powerful world which must, sooner or later, lay our private world in ruins [...]. **In such a life there is no peace, but a constant strife between the insistence of desire and the powerlessness of will. In one way or another, if our life is to be great and free, we must escape this prison and this strife. One way of escape is by philosophic contemplation.** (Russell, 1912, p. 244, my emphasis)

There are significant commonalities between Russell’s and Aristotle’s accounts of philosophic contemplation. To be sure, Aristotle’s aforementioned metaphysical commitments are not present in Russell’s view.<sup>21</sup> Aristotle does not contrast the life of contemplation to the “feverish and confined” life of the instinctive person in the way Russell does. Nor does he describe it as a way of *escape* from the latter. However, Aristotle does argue against being confined to thinking of “human things” and “mortal things” (NE1177b31) when he states that “we must not follow those who advise us, [...], to think of human things, [...] but must, *so far as we can*, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us” (NE1177b31–1178a4, my italics) — that is, we must, so far as we can, engage in contemplation. Furthermore, just as Russell takes philosophic contemplation to give rise to freedom from narrow and personal aims, Aristotle attributes a disinterested and liberating quality to contemplation by assigning different objects to it than contingent, human things.

<sup>21</sup> I should note that in some of his other works, Russell does use metaphysical imagery when he explains what he means by *wisdom*. For instance, in *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, in invoking Spinoza, Russell states that “[i]t is this happy contemplation of what is eternal that Spinoza calls the intellectual love of God. To those who have once known it, it is the key of wisdom” (Russell, 1916, pp. 245–246). By *eternal*, he means something “outside human life, some end which is impersonal and above mankind, such as God or truth or beauty” (Russell, 1916, p. 245).

#### 4.2. Philosophic Contemplation, Solitude, and Loneliness

Philosophy is often praised for its ability to help people develop critical thinking skills. It is fairly common to see philosophy departments emphasize how useful these skills are in many aspects of life, including work and academic settings, in order to attract students. My goal here is to highlight another aspect of philosophy that is related, yet not immediately *useful* in many aspects of life as we know it — that is, the detached and disinterested nature of philosophic contemplation.

My view of philosophic contemplation draws on the aforementioned, overlapping views of Aristotle and Russell on this topic. As I see it, philosophic contemplation offers a break, albeit temporary, from a human-centric, social life, which Deresiewicz describes as “a bustle of petty concerns, a jostle of quotidian interests” (Deresiewicz, 2009). To be sure, making well-informed decisions about these concerns, navigating these interests, interacting with our fellow humans, and having meaningful relationships with them are crucial to living a good life. However, it is important to also recognize that there is more to us, others, and the universe than our anthropocentric circle of private interests. In order to recognize this and enjoy being alone in a relational way as is the case with authentic solitude, we need to create a mental space that is distinct from ordinary life. One of the ways through which we can construct such a mental space is philosophic contemplation in the sense explained above.

Even though I do not hereby suggest that philosophic contemplation and solitude *necessarily* go together, there is nonetheless a connection between them due to mental space provided by philosophic contemplation thanks to the nature of its objects. These objects are varied to include questions pertaining to the nature of reality, consciousness, free will, determinism, personal identity, knowledge, mind-body relation, grounding, explanation, among many others. Philosophic contemplation allows individuals to examine, for instance, criteria for moral status and question whether robot consciousness confers moral status. It enables them to view their lives *sub specie aeternitatis* — that is, through the perspective of what Thomas Nagel calls, the *view from nowhere* (Nagel, 1986), by way of which they can examine their lives externally, impersonally, and objectively. Thanks to philosophic contemplation, individuals can conceive of themselves and others as finite parts of nature and take on an anti-anthropocentric stance in their view of the universe as Spinoza does. This may help them feel related to not just their fellow humans, but to all other parts of nature. As these examples and countless others that are not noted here show, in enabling individuals to conceive of themselves, others, and the universe differently than they ordinarily do, philosophic contemplation may expand their scope of interests beyond humanity and their narrow and personal aims.

Now how does all this bear on the issue of loneliness? According to the standard definition in the psychological literature, loneliness is a negative emotional state that arises when there is a perceived discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships (see, for instance, Achtenberg et al., 2020; Pepleu & Perlman, 1982).<sup>22</sup> As seen earlier, Gheaus follows a similar definition when she considers loneliness to be fundamentally caused by a lack of satisfying relationships and emotional connection.

<sup>22</sup> As seen in Section 2 of this article, Gheaus follows the psychological literature and takes loneliness to “mean a negative emotional reaction — of sadness, or even grief — at the fact of not having the desired level of emotional connection with others” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 236).

Given this definition of loneliness and the account of philosophic contemplation I presented, there are two interrelated reasons to think that philosophic contemplation may reduce loneliness. The first is that philosophic contemplation could help create favourable conditions for cultivating authentic solitude and its relational dimensions. The second is that philosophic contemplation may lessen one's desire for social interaction by offering an alternative source of satisfaction.<sup>23</sup>

To elaborate on the first reason, although I agree with Arendt and Deresiewicz that the ability to be alone bears on our propensity for thinking, I further argue that fostering a particular kind of thinking — that is, philosophic contemplation — could, in turn, lead to an improvement in one's capacity to enjoy one's own company and feel connected to others when one is alone. Gheaus rightly observes that people suffer loneliness even when they live socially active lives, and often being around people with whom they lack an emotional connection worsens this feeling of loneliness. It is plausible to think that people are more likely to turn to unsatisfying relations, or lose their ability to get out of them, when they are stuck in the narrow circle of private interests (including intimate attachments) or in thinking that the only relationships are the ones they have with their fellow humans in society. In expanding their scope of interests beyond humanity and their narrow and personal aims, philosophic contemplation may help them construct a mental space, wherein authentic solitude can unfold and they can enjoy being alone together with the company of their thinking self, as well as others, conceived broadly. To be sure, humans are inherently social and have an innate need for connection with other humans. However, despite this, some people may benefit from recognizing that there are other “possibilities for communion” (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014, p. 92) that go beyond human-centric interactions, and from experiencing alternative forms of relatedness in a different kind of mental space that distances them from the physical and social realities of everyday life. This, in turn, could satisfy their need for relatedness, thereby reducing feelings of loneliness to a certain extent and preventing them from turning to unsatisfying relationships.

The second reason focuses on how philosophic contemplation may reduce loneliness by diminishing the desire for emotional connection with other people. If loneliness — as defined — arises due to a perceived discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships, then a change in one's desire for social interactions would naturally influence the extent to which one feels lonely. Importantly, this holds true even though this desire is subject to individual variation. As Anthony Storr observes, we live in a society wherein there is significant “emphasis upon intimate interpersonal relationships as the touchstone of health and happiness” (Storr, 1988, p. 1). In this context, the capacity to form and sustain these relationships is considered the main evidence of emotional maturity and the absence of this capacity is seen as “pathological” (Storr, 1988, p. 243). It is thus not surprising that “[h]uman beings easily become alienated from their deepest needs and feelings” (Storr, 1988, p. 28) due to the social pressure associated with the idea of an objectively defined level of emotional connection with others. As a result, they turn to unsatisfying relationships and/or social media, wherein they “live exclusively in relation to others” (Deresiewicz, 2009), which, in turn, leads to loneliness that dominates a very confined way of life.

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<sup>23</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for prompting me to clarify these two reasons.

For some people, philosophic contemplation may offer a way out of this confinement by satisfying their “deepest needs” (Storr, 1988, p. 28) to reflect and expand their scope of interests beyond humanity and the narrow circle of our personal aims within it. Philosophic contemplation could provide a unique kind of satisfaction that may reduce these individuals’ desire for social interaction due to its detached and disinterested nature, as well as the calming and liberating mental space it offers, given the nature of its objects mentioned earlier. Consequently, it could enable them to enjoy their own thinking company and “prefer it to the company of people with whom one cannot establish fulfilling relationships” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 249).

## 5. Concluding Remarks

This article is built on the premises that loneliness undermines both individual and social wellbeing and that one way to address it is through fostering an appreciation for solitude. As seen earlier, Gheaus presents cultivating an appreciation for solitude, “both as an alternative to unsatisfying relationships and as a perhaps necessary condition for genuine emotional connection” (Gheaus, 2022, p. 249). Velleman also similarly holds that “[t]he capacity to savor solitude enhances one’s capacities for companionship, friendship, and love” (Velleman, 2015, p. 116). If Gheaus and Velleman are right, then in order to enhance our capacity for friendship and emotional connection with others, we may need to do more than just focus on other people. We may need to also pay attention to ourselves, enhance our ability to enjoy our own company, and make friends with ourselves.<sup>24</sup>

I suggested in the previous section that cultivating philosophic contemplation may contribute towards this end. But neither this suggestion, nor the general idea that cultivating an appreciation of solitude enhances our capacity for genuine emotional connection, is without problems. Philosophic contemplation or any other activity that provides us with a mental space that is distinct from the physical and social realities of everyday life could in some cases even *diminish* our capacity for friendship and genuine emotional connection. This is because, once we learn to take pleasure in being alone in a relational way as is the case with authentic solitude, we may not feel motivated or interested in putting in the work that goes into forming genuine friendships with other humans. As Setiya notes “friendship can begin with the simple act of paying attention” (Setiya, 2022, p. 63) to other people. But if we are in a mental space wherein other people and their concerns do not appear visible or interesting to us, then that simple act may not be so easy to realize, let alone the emotional connection that will build on that act. Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that many of the greatest philosophers, such as Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Leibniz, Nietzsche, have opted for relatively solitary lives (see Storr, 1988, p. ix).<sup>25</sup>

This problem does not undermine Gheaus’ thesis as a whole. After all, one of her main claims is that solitude is valuable to human flourishing thanks to its effectiveness

<sup>24</sup> Aristotle describes one’s relation to oneself as the paradigmatic case of friendship: “[o]ne is a friend to himself most of all” (NE1168b9).

<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche, in particular, also lists solitude among the four cardinal virtues in *Beyond Good and Evil* (Nietzsche, 1998).



in combatting loneliness, which significantly detracts from individual wellbeing. On this account, to the extent that we are capable of appreciating and enjoying solitude, we will be protected from living a life wherein loneliness predominates. The problem arises when/if we assume that this capacity will thereby enhance our capacities for friendship and genuine emotional connection. After all, individuals may end up enjoying solitude so much that they prefer their own company to the company of other humans (not just the ones with whom they cannot establish fulfilling relationships) the greater part of the time, feeling that “[to] be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating” (Thoreau, 1983, p. 109). But this does not mean that they, thereby, suffer loneliness. Nor does it mean that solitude is valuable to human flourishing only when it enhances our capacity for friendship and emotional connection with other humans. As I see it, individuals can be alone and enjoy their own company without feeling lonely, just as they can feel lonely in the company of others. Finally, they can live a fulfilled life, wherein they “love to be alone [and] find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time” (Thoreau, 1983, p. 109) as did Henry David Thoreau.

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