



#83 The Psychology of Solitude

“The fear of finding oneself alone – that is what they suffer from – and so they don’t find themselves at all.” (Andre Gide, The Immoralist)

Human beings are social by nature and unfit to endure extreme cases of isolation. If we are alone for too long our mental faculties can degrade, leading to states of insanity and deep despair. The use of solitary confinement and exile are practices with ancient roots, indicating that people have long understood just how deeply the fear of isolation runs through our veins.

But in the modern day our fears are not restricted to extreme forms of isolation, rather many of us fear being alone for any extended period of time. In this video we’ll investigate this fear, explain the detrimental effects it can have on one’s relationships, and explore the benefits of overcoming this fear and learning to find solace in solitude.

Many thinkers have suggested that the fear of solitude is at root a fear of oneself. In our normal daily routines, busied with work and chores and most often in the presence of others, our social persona comes to the fore and frightening thoughts and emotions are pushed outside of our awareness. But when away from the restricting confines of others, these darker aspects of ourselves tend to rise to the surface and make their presence known.

“It is what one takes into solitude that grows there, the beast within included.” (Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra)

Hence, there is a danger in spending a significant amount of time isolated from others, as there will come a time when, broken down by the beast within, solitude will weigh us down and become a great curse.

There are some who can endure this crisis of solitude, and through a heroic effort tame and integrate the darkness within, but most would be destroyed by such a confrontation, which is why Nietzsche thought “many should be dissuaded from solitude.”(Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra) The default response for those for



whom solitariness is too heavy a weight to bear is to cling to others to ensure they never feel alone.

“One man runs to his neighbour because he is looking for himself, and another because he wants to lose himself. Your bad love of yourselves makes solitude a prison to you.”(Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra)

Those who lose themselves in others may be saved from their solitude, but they always turn out to be crippled versions of the person they could have become. In order for us to actualize our potential we need to fulfill what the psychologist Abraham Maslow called our “metaneeds” or “highest needs”, which include the drive for truth, beauty, and goodness. These needs, as Ernest Becker noted in his book *The Denial of Death*, cannot be completely fulfilled by other people: “It is impossible to get blood from a stone, to get spirituality from a physical being.”(Ernest Becker, *Denial of Death*) Any attempt to fulfill the totality of our metaneeds through an intimate relationship will result in a god-like idealization of the partner, and a resultant slavish dependence on them for our self-worth and identity.

“If the partner becomes God they can just as easily become the Devil; the reason is not far to seek...If you find the ideal love and try to make it the sole judge of good and bad in yourself, the measure of your strivings, you become simply the reflex of another person. You lose yourself in the other, just as obedient children lose themselves in the family. No wonder that dependency, whether of the god or the slave in the relationship, carries with it so much underlying resentment.” (Ernest Becker, *Denial of Death*)

To ensure we don't, like many individuals today, fall victim to dependence-driven relationships we must develop what the 20th century psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott called “the capacity to be alone”. When the fear of solitude makes us dependent on others, we become overly compliant out of a fear of abandonment, and thus build up what Winnicott called a False Self, that is, our personality becomes a mere reflex of how we believe others want us to be. It is in developing the capacity to be alone that the False Self can be broken down, thought Winnicott, rendering us able to rediscover our True Self, or in other words, our authentic feelings and needs.



In the modern day most are oblivious to the benefits of solitude. Instead, many unknowingly adhere to what is called Object Relations Theory, which is based on two key assumptions: that the maturation of one's personality can only be facilitated through interpersonal relationships, and that these relationships are the primary, if not sole, source of meaning in life. In his influential work *Attachment and Loss*, John Bowlby, an adherent of this view, wrote:

“Intimate attachments to other human beings are the hub around which a person's life revolves, not only when he is an infant or toddler or school child but throughout his adolescence and his years of maturity as well, and on into old age.” (John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*)

Taken to their extreme, the assumptions held by Object Relations Theorists imply that the individual's life has no meaning apart from interpersonal relationships, thus overlooking the well-established fact that meaning can be found and personal growth stimulated when we cultivate, in solitude, a relationship with some form of creative work that consumes our attention. As the 20th century psychiatrist Anthony Storr argued in his book *Solitude: A Return to the Self*, in the struggle to give form and order to an external creative work, we are also, often without knowing it, imposing form and order on our mind.

“...maturation and integration can take place within the isolated individual to a greater extent than I had allowed for...introverted creators are able to define identity and achieve self-realization by self-reference, that is, by interacting with their work rather than by interacting with other people. (Anthony Storr, *Solitude: A Return to the Self*)

It is this ability to achieve self-realization by developing a relationship with our work that led the Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky to claim solitude for the mind to be as essential as food is for the body. In solitude we can forge our character away from the often constricting external demands of others, and maintain our independence in the relationships we do cultivate, thus ensuring we do not, like many today, lose our identity in them.



Yet as we learn to flourish in solitude we must not dismiss the dangers of it which Nietzsche spoke of, dangers which led Goethe to write: “there is nothing more dangerous than solitude.” (Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*) We can increase our capacity to deal with these dangers, however, if we consider the possibility that the benefits of solitude are embedded in its dangers, meaning that it is only by voluntarily seeking out solitude and confronting the darkness within that we extract the benefits of being alone, and perhaps even eventually attain the rare self-confidence of one who has gained sovereignty over himself.

“...you should not let yourself be confused in your solitude by the fact that there is some thing in you that wants to move out of it...We know little, but that we must trust in what is difficult is a certainty that will never abandon us; it is good to be solitary, for solitude is difficult; that something is difficult must be one more reason for us to do it.” (Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*)