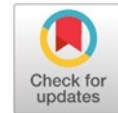# Book Review: The Bloomsbury Handbook of Solitude, Silence and Loneliness

Edited by Julian Stern, Malgorzata Waleijko, Christopher A. Sink and Wong Ping Ho
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ABSTRACT

This review outlines some key contents and features of a recently published handbook, perhaps the first comprehensive collection of scholarly works that brings together the three related themes, solitude, silence and loneliness. The volume also represents a dialogic and idea-sharing space among researchers in these areas. Some authors are members of the International Society for Research on Solitude (ISRS); others are editorial members of the Journal of Silence Studies (JSSE). As a humble but growing field, these themes have increasingly attracted scholarly attention, evident in activities such as the annual Alone Together Symposium initiated by Prof Julian Stern (UK) and Dr Malgorzata Walejko (Poland), the forthcoming Solitude Book Series with Bloomsbury, many research articles contributing to the Journal of Silence Studies (JSSE), among other undertakings that are expanding the body of research-based knowledge in silence studies.

It is sometimes said that humans are creatures of routine. Being inherently members of various communities, we have developed the habituation of wanting to fit in. However, occasionally stepping back and willfully challenging this momentum can help us become self-reliant and self-aware in selecting life resources, be it social or individual. While some people feel safe and comfortable with social activities, others regulate them to a certain dose and strive for a balance between being with the self and being with others. Many find that their mentality is well nurtured by an extended time alone. Although there should be no hierarchy as to which of these modes is most ideal for all individuals, there seems to be a far more academic discourse that addresses knowledge and skills as social beings than discourse about the awareness and skills of being solo. This book is a comprehensive exploration into that internal space where experiences related to the self, whether they denote power or pain, are unpacked in all interesting shades.

As someone who has experienced education in the east and the west, I have witnessed two opposing forms of discipline for misbehaving children. The Asian child receives a punishment by being sent out to the external world to suffer from social fright, while the Western child takes the warning by being locked up in the home to suffer from isolation. While solitude is a reward in Asia and socialisation is punitive, the case seems reverse in the west where socialisation is a reward while solitude can be a punishment. This observation is an example of solitude as a highly contextualised

construct. This book shares many incidents to assist readers' understanding of the meaning of solitude, silence and loneliness in multifaceted ways.

Major features of the book

I read this *Handbook of Solitude, Silence and Loneliness* with personal curiosity and tremendous enjoyment. Having researched the silent mind and thought processes, I find the book helpful not only in reshaping my understanding of the self beyond cognition but also in enhancing my knowledge about how diverse sub-themes of solitude, silence and loneliness are multifariously contextualised. The major strength of the handbook is an inclusive attempt to bring together so many fresh perspectives on these areas in nuances and with thought-provoking complexity.

A second feature of the book is its communicative and interdisciplinary measure. It seems communicative for being straight to the point and easy to read. It is interdisciplinary for embracing multiple fields of studies including philosophy, psychology, social ecology, theology, and educational psychology, communication studies, moral education, among others. Both the editors and contributors are academic professionals from highly diverse cultural backgrounds, disciplines, and working contexts.

As a third feature, the book is founded upon both theory and practice when the chapters not only draw on empirical work but also from observation and experience. That is, views are shaped by both specialist theorisation and individual voices from in the real world. Such amalgamation of both theorisation and experience enriches the work in a well-balanced manner. Besides scholarly knowledge, there are practical recommendations for non-academic readers with a special interest in solitude, silence and loneliness to use as methods of improving their wellbeing. As indicated in many discussions in the work, wellbeing could take on both interpersonal and intrapersonal meanings.

Along that line, a thread that runs through all the contributions is the dual understanding that each of the three main themes can move and pause anywhere along the continuum of more to less desirability. Each theme can be a learning experience for self-reformation or obstacles to be overcome. For example, while loneliness can cause one to feel dejected (chapters 17 and 18), it can serve as a learning ground for those who wish to find their expressive self in solitary circumstances (chapter 19). These understandings echo the discourse where one can find punitive solitude (Harber, 2004: O'Donnelle, 2014), punitive silence (Ovid, 2005) and punitive loneliness (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009) as much as good solitude (Huppert, 2010), good silence (Winichakul, 2020) and good loneliness (Jandrić, 2022).

Part I – Solitude (pp. 11-128)

Solitude can be 'the good space' that 'embraces a personal decision to engage with the internal world and disengage with the external one (Małgorzata Wałejko, introduction to part I). Solitude can exhibit contrastive significances including exile versus joy, confinement versus freedom, and glory versus suffering. Solitude can be abstract or concrete, such as spiritual space or personal growth. Solitude can be viewed objectively (people can see what it means) or subjectively (no one else can understand it except the solitary person). Solitary can be enforced or chosen. These dualities, however, represent only one dimension of the solitude experience.

Moving further than that, this section takes readers through the inherent complexity of solitude in a spectrum rather than in bipolarity. It is difficult and in many cases impossible to assess solitude as positive as negative (Piotr Domeracki, chapter 1). Along that spectrum, solitude can be internalised in diverse ways, including being a right and a plan in education (Helen Lees, chapter 2 and Michael T Buchanan, chapter 3), attentive relationship with nature (Amanda Fulford, chapter 4), a zone for strength development (David Weir, chapter 5), political issues (Henrieta Șerban and Aleksander Cywiński, chapter 6), a theme that inspires art, music and literature (JulianStern, chapter 7 and Wong Ping Ho, chapter 8) and elements of spirituality (Wong Ping Ho, chapter 8 and Gillian Simpson, chapter 9). This range of contributions to the dynamics of solitude is enriching and would inspire research scholars to explore further, for example, the construct as philosophy, pedagogy, politics, art, religious education, as well as ways of living and experiencing. To a great extent, the discussion of solitude in the book is far from conclusive but remains open-minded and highly inspirational dialogues for the field to expand with new prospective responses. As a bonus, what also makes this section

particularly enjoyable for me (and hopefully for most readers) is a collection of fascinating examples drawn from creative literature, academic discourse, research and real life to keep discussions vivid and convincing in their distinctive ways.

Part II – Silence (pp. 129-210)

Silence is a highly versatile construct. It can be connected to conflicting connotations such as peace or fear, reward or penalty, empowerment or disempowerment, activeness or passivity, meaning or emptiness, good health or poor health. Silence is linked to speech two sides of the same coin whereby one would not exist in the absence of the other. Silence also reaches out to a wide range of issues and concepts including stillness (Richard Cleveland, chapter 10; Sandra Bosacki, chapter 11; Eva Alerby, chapter 14), ancient culture (Wong Ping Ho, Introduction to Part II), bonding (Eva Alerby, chapter 14), freedom, agency, wellbeing, autonomy (Richard Cleveland, chapter 10), self-protection, reflection, mindfulness, freedom, agency nurturing, self-control (Sandra Bosacki, chapter 11), voice giving, self-discipline (Teresa Olearczyk, chapter 12), as well as solitude and loneliness as discussed in many chapters. Similar to solitude and loneliness, silence is essential to the fostering of creativity (Sandra Bosacki, chapter 11; Teresa Olearczyk, chapter 12).

Despite all this, one might be precautious that unreasonable use of silence might risk the loss of discursive and cause inequality (Helen Sauntson and Rodrigo Borba, chapter 13). Being a potential source of intimidation if misused, silence in this section acts mostly as the solution for problems such as the persistence of noise and the lack of calm and quiet space in educational settings (Eva Alerby, chapter 14), among other problems. Silence brings safety, peace, and freedom when one does not wish to be entangled with all the odds that are disruptive rather than helpful (Anne Prirrie and Nini Fang, chapter 15). What ties these chapters together is the awareness for silence to be productive through agency and self-discipline rather than being left to chance.

It is important to notice that outside of this book, there remains a colossal body of literature that conceptualises silence as hopelessness and the loss of voice, with too many references to be cited here. In this regard, this handbook with its nourishing voice on silence brings a contrast of tone that is kind, delicate and thoughtful. To read the section of the book, therefore, is like walking through a small garden to appreciate the blossoms of silence that have survived some of the discourse that endorses the right of overpowering speech.

Part III – Loneliness (pp. 211-334)

As highlighted by Julian Stern and Christopher A. Sink, solitude, silence and loneliness are 'deeply rooted in human experiences and personhood' (p.213). The philosophical interpretation of loneliness embraces the belief in the self for this concept to make sense (Ben Lazare Mijuskovic, chapter 16) and one such meaning can be the personal freedom of choice rather than something being imposed on every individual. From a psychological standpoint, however, loneliness might involve risk factors and might call for intervention options (Christopher A. Sink, chapter 17). A focus on the lonely experiences of children and youth from an educational and psychological angle put together reveals the topic in a different light, that is, entailing the need to support and resources for coping with and overcoming the undesirable impact of loneliness on one's wellbeing (Sivan George-Levi, Tomer Schmidt-Barad, and Malka Margalit, chapters 18 and Elżbieta Dubas, chapter 19). From a moral perspective, loneliness can involve dilemmas that one has to cope and decisions that one must make in everyday life (Jarosław Horowski, chapter 20). Viewed as part of reality in communication, loneliness can represent the challenge of social isolation and the lack of connectedness (Alison Wray, chapter 21). This discussion recognises various types of being lonely that be cognitive, affective, or social as stemming from one's self-protective mechanism. In the subsequent discussion, this construct is further conceptualised as having situational, developmental and internal significance (Rafał Iwański, chapter 22). Loneliness can also be perceived on a sociological level that captures damage to the emotional wellbeing of people in a community such as attachment, isolation and bereavement (James and Krakowiak, chapter 23).

This section overall enriches the existing discourse on the lonely human experience with nuanced cases. Instead, loneliness being a highly individual and emotive construct is hardly subject to any measuring framework. Because of that, like clouds in the sky that are constantly transforming,

research studies on this theme do not converse in their conclusion. Without settling on any communal interpretation, our exploration of loneliness will continue to be fresh and interesting.

Being twice the size of a usual academic volume, this handsome handbook offers an extended menu to the motivated intellectual mind. For curious readers with a great interest in understanding the complex self in relation to the surrounding world but without accessive reliance on social representations, the book is abounding in rewarding insights and fresh, stimulating contemplations. I highly recommend this work for both academic learning and pleasure reading. As a reader-learner, I have gained as much new knowledge from it as I have enjoyed its accessible writing styles. This is because the contributing authors are well-known and highly respected academics in the field. I had difficulty identifying any obvious weaknesses and would leave that aspect alone for the moment. As a scholar in silence studies, I find this interdisciplinary collection particularly creative and valuable as it stretches me to think beyond where commonly seen perspectives might restrain my thinking.

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