On Solitude

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What is solitude? Defining it simply as an absence of others doesn't go far enough, because that avoids the question of what it means to someone experiencing it. And that aspect in turn implies that merely technical aloneness may not suffice for true solitude, or even be needed.

Solitude is best understood as a way of being in the world, or what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls 'a form of life.' [1] It thus goes beyond shunning company, say – which is rarely possible anyway, to any great degree – to living in a way which places a high value on one's self. One's self becomes the focus of sustained attention.

Saying so, however, invites a misunderstanding, because such attention is not necessarily egotistical. Indeed, it is very different, for self and world are inseparable. We can distinguish between them, of course, but only ever relatively and changeably, and in the felt sense that 'inner' and 'outer' have different qualities. In lived practice, there is never only one or the other. As Wittgenstein also says, life is neither purely physiological nor purely psychological: 'Life is the world'. [2] So study the self is also to study the world.

There are related reasons why valuing and attending to one's self, which solitude enables and encourages, is not merely about oneself. Other selves work essentially the same way, by virtue of the same dynamics; so to understand how one's own self works is to better understand others'. To be sure, their content can differ wildly; here again is the contingency of experience. But we can become aware of shared modes, running through the welter. It's not that they lie under or above or behind 'mere' appearances; it's that the latter includes them (along with everything else).

Nor can the self and its modes be studied in abstraction from the rest of life. Even the most abstruse philosophy is a lived practice too, if an often radically impoverished one. Real observing and thinking– two sides of the same coin – only take place when you haven't already decided the conclusion in advance. Otherwise, as Niels Bohr is supposed to have remarked, you are merely being logical. [3] So to think is to discover, and vice versa.

 Another reason why the solitary self isn't necessarily narcissistic is that like the world, it is entirely formed and constituted by relationships. There is always at the very least one other party at the other end, with whom one's self is in an ongoing dance of mutual interdependency, making and being made by. In this way, selves are what the Buddhists call 'empty'. In the words of Dōgen Zenji, the 13th century master, 'To study the self is to forget the self, and to forget the self is to be enlightened by everything'. [4]

A prerequisite here, as so often, is unthinking what Raymond Geuss calls '2,000 years of post-Platonic indoctrination'. [5] Starting with the Idea, or Spirit, or pure mind, leaves nowhere to go. In fact, it leaves nowhere at all. But so too does inverting that assumption and starting with putatively pure materiality, such as neurophysiology. That leaves no one at all.

Let's return to solitude as a way of life and see if we can develop that idea further. Here I want to draw upon another master: Michel de Montaigne. In his essay on solitude, he writes that it is not enough to withdraw from the multitude: 'we have to withdraw from such attributes of the mob as are within us.' [6] We must therefore take our soul back into our own possession, bring it home into our self. And Montaigne definitely means an embodied self.

But again, we must beware our philosophical schooling. This body is not an epiphenomenal appendage of an enduring metaphysical self. Nor, however, is it a machine – even an organic machine. (See how the metaphor we created recreates us in its own likeness: analogue animals pathetically trying, or being forced, to behave like digital binary code!) Rather, body and mind are distinguishable but inseparable, an articulated unity, through and *as* which one lives.

The result of the self returning to itself, writes Montaigne, 'is true solitude.' As such, it 'can be enjoyed in towns and in kings' courts, but' (in a nicely laconic concession) 'more conveniently apart.' [7] By the same token, partners, children and goods are not a problem, precisely because the fulfilment which follows from such solitude doesn't completely depend on them.

How is one to carry this through? Montaigne's famous advice is to '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': *une arrière-boutique*, for ourself alone, behind the public self. [8]

I think this idea is sufficiently robust to withstand questioning on a number of fronts. For one thing, isn't it true that just as selves are constituted relationally, humans are fundamentally social animals? Certainly, so the solitary self is no less formed by and of relationships of all kinds (by no means restricted to those who are physically present). And I grant the importance of an indispensable minimum of sociality, which Montaigne tacitly admits when he counsels against seeking solitude by retreating to a deserted wilderness. But neither point means that maintaining a private room at the back of one's shared life is not possible, desirable, or even necessary.

What about undue privilege? Doesn't Montaigne assume an elegant sufficiency (such as obtained for him) of material goods and supplies? Indeed, and this point reminds us of the legitimate needs of the body and thence mind. It doesn't refute his advice, however. Given a sufficiency – not, note, an extravagance – it becomes possible, in principle, to develop a self with a high degree of integrity and durability, even though it is not invulnerable or eternal.

Relatedly, is his advice indefensibly quietistic? Isn't the personal political? Yes again, but it is not *only* so. The history of the last century shows that when politics is taken to rightfully occupy and exhaust the personal, the result is barbarism of the worst sort. The Cultural Revolution, the Cambodian killing fields, Stalin's Great Terror: whatever their other dynamics, none of these would have been possible absent such a belief.

Indeed, far from solitude being anti-social, or inducing passivity, some of its virtues are distinctly republican: self-awareness and therefore awareness of others, as equals; independence of thought and thence action; and courage, including the courage to stand alone if need be. Without a sufficiency in turn of such individuals in the world, what hope remains of a relatively informed, responsible and active citizenry? None, I would say.

We don't need to thank the pandemic for redirecting attention to our selves and our lives, and reminding us to ask what's important, nor lockdown for reminding us of solitude. Still less should we thank the virus for showcasing our appalling collective treatment of the natural world, including other animals, which was already crying out for rectification. Yet all this is no reason not to extract something positive, if we can.

Conversely, we can be grateful for the convenience and comfort of Zoom, Skype, social media, email &c. while recognising their radical inadequacy as a substitute for actual interaction – the same minimally rich and complex sociality which, paradoxically, true solitude requires, and enables. And I doubt this gap can ever be closed by technology, no matter how sophisticated; unless the body-and-mind positively wants to be fooled, it just isn't.

Of course, it's also true that these things are not necessarily impediments to self-development through solitude. If only they didn't become impediments so easily, because, after all, grabbing and keeping your attention is exactly what they were designed to do. In their owners' hands they become the twin instruments of corporate consumerism and mass surveillance, working tirelessly to convert unique individual selves into interchangeable, quantifiable units. We have our work cut out for us to resist and counter that slide, and neither electronic devices nor the accompanying culture can help.

At this point, allow me a detour – except that it isn't, because it returns us to our starting-point by a different way. The twenty-fourth hexagram of that ancient divinatory text the *I Ching*, or *Classic of Changes*, is 'Return'. Richard Wilhelm's commentary on it particularly resonates with the spirit of Montaigne's work. He writes, 'Things cannot be destroyed once and for all. When what is above is completely split apart, it returns below. Hence… Return means coming back… [It] leads to self-knowledge.' And during this turning-point, 'merchants and strangers did not go about, and the ruler did not travel through the provinces'. [9] In other words, the ruler – whom we may take as any kind of sovereign – returns to where they properly live, and takes up residence once again in that room at the back.

This, it seems to me, is a pretty good description of something we now urgently need to do, as the pandemic is reminding us. It also approaches a universal truth. But I make no claim to transcendental, eternal, or sole truth. The resonance between Montaigne's humane and sceptical classical humanism and certain traditions of Chinese philosophy (historically and culturally completely unrelated) is no mere coincidence. That is particularly true of Neo-Confucianism, running from the 11th to the 15th centuries, with its emphasis on developing and maintaining a unique self through careful and responsible sociality. [10]

What we have instead is something more important: a *human* truth. It is rooted in relatively stable and enduring human nature, which is not something to be mastered – that old dream-cum-nightmare – but, like the rest of nature, to be respected and worked with. And in this context, the ruler who is being called upon to return home and refrain, for now and until renewed, from touring the provinces, is the solitary self.

Then, how good it will be to meet again!

REFERENCES

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001): 75e. (Wittgenstein himself loved solitude, but also feared it.)
2. Wittgenstein's war diary, MS. 103, 30.
3. Niels Bohr, as quoted in Otto Robert Frisch, *What Little I Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979): 95.
4. Hakuun Yasutani, *Flowers Fall: A Commentary on Zen Master Dōgen's Genjōkōan* (Boston: Shambhala, 1996): 102. (I have slightly amended the translation.)
5. Raymond Geuss, *Changing the Subject: Philosophy from Socrates to Adorno* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2017): 263.
6. Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, transl. M.A. Screech London: Penguin Books, 1991): 269.
7. *Idem.*

8. *Idem*, p. 270. See also M.A. Screech's excellent commentary in his *Montaigne and Melancholy: The Wisdom of the Essays* (Lanham: Rowland and Littlefield, 2000): 67-70.
9. *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, transl. Richard Wilhelm and into English by Cary F. Baynes (London: RKP, 1968): 98.
10. See, for example, William Theodore de Bary, *Learning for Oneself. Essays on the Individual in Neo-Confucian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). (Arguably its most important philosopher, Zhi Xi (1130-1200), was also the *I Ching*'s most influential commentator.)

[Words, incl. references: 1849]