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Living happily alone in Plato's cave? On loneliness, technology and the metaphysics of presence

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ABSTRACT

In a lot of research on loneliness and technology, there is an underlying premise that actual, physical presence is more real than 'virtual' presence. This premise is rarely explicit, yet it implies a hierarchy of reality, where the 'here and now' is always on top. In this theoretical paper, we examine this latent hierarchy and the understandings of presence and mediation it implies. We point towards potential consequences of this understanding for research on the role of technology in reducing loneliness and social isolation. To do this, we draw on the philosophical analysis made by Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida of what they called 'the metaphysics of presence'. This is the tendency to privilege presence as the only immediate and truthful access to reality, whereas all forms of mediations constitute mere approximations, derivations and second-rate realities with dubious truth value. First, we present their diagnosis, and then we show how it pertains to research on virtual presence and loneliness by analysing some examples from this research. Finally, we discuss some potential implications of the metaphysics of presence through a case story compiled from our empirical research. Our foundational assertion is that the question of whether anyone experiences loneliness is an empirical and not a metaphysical question. If we want to properly understand loneliness and the potential for alleviating it through the use of teletechnologies, we might get off on the wrong foot if we carry with us assumptions suggesting the existence of ascending levels of reality and presence.

INTRODUCTION

Greg¹ likes to watch TV. He does not have a lot of friends and his health is deteriorating, so he does not go out of his apartment very often. In fact, he spends most of his time in the living room, in his chair in front of the TV. He watches the morning show, laughing when the hosts are making their jokes. He watches reruns of his favorite programs, identifying with the guests, remembering their stories. He watches all kinds of sports, cheering on his team and shouting comments at the referees. He often falls asleep in his chair, with the TV on, and when waking up in the morning, he just continues where he left off the day before. Should we assume that Greg is lonely?

According to some journalists and researchers, we live in the middle of a loneliness epidemic (Khaleeli 2013; Killeen 1998), and recently, the US surgeon general called loneliness a public health crisis (Jaffe 2023). Policymakers in several countries have placed loneliness high on the agenda and countries such as Norway, Japan and the UK have made loneliness a policy priority (DHC 2019; Jiji 2023;

DCMS 2018). In 2018, the UK even appointed a 'loneliness minister' and in 2021 Japan did the same (Barron 2018; The Lancet 2023).

Loneliness is typically defined in subjective terms as "the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relations is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively" (Perlman and Peplau 1981, 31). While social isolation simply refers to not having a lot of contact with others (Hortulanus, Machielse, and Meeuwesen 2006). In this paper, our focus is on exploring the interface between these two concepts, and thus we treat social isolation and loneliness as interconnected phenomena throughout our study.

A lot of research on loneliness is dominated by medical perspectives, using quantitative methods to identify who are lonely, count them and ask questions about how and why they are lonely and what that implies (Holt-Lunstad *et al* 2015). This strand of research reveals that loneliness can result from losing your partner (Jylhä 2004), chronic disease (Alma *et al* 2011) living alone (Nygqvist *et al* 2013) or belonging to an ethnic minority (Victor, Burholt and Martin 2012). A forthcoming series in the Lancet draws attention to loneliness as a health issue and synthesise evidence-based recommendations for research, practice and policy (The Lancet 2023). Concurrently, there has been a surge in social science research on loneliness and social isolation (Snell 2017; Ozawa-de Silva and Parsons 2020; Mijuskovic 2012), including research aimed at mitigating the problem (O'Rourke, Collins and Sidani 2018; Poscia *et al* 2018; Quan *et al* 2020).

Based on the premise that there is a connection between loneliness and a deficit in social contact (Victor, Burholt and Martin 2012), new digital technologies appear to hold significant promise in alleviating loneliness due to their enhanced capacity to facilitate *virtual presence* (Chayko 2012; Cummings and Wertz 2023; Johannessen 2023). However, the rise of technology for reducing social isolation and loneliness has generated vigorous debate about whether technology can provide *authentic* connections to alleviate loneliness or if it actually contributes to the phenomenon (Turkle 2011). There is a prevailing public sentiment that teletechnology and social media lead to loneliness among young people while they are seen as avenues for promoting social interaction among the elderly and disabled (Jentoft and Haldar 2023).

In a lot of research on loneliness and technological remedies, there seem to be an underlying assumption that actual, physical presence is primary, while mediated or 'virtual' presence is secondary or derived from proper presence. This premise is



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rarely expressed or acknowledged, yet it implies a latent hierarchy of reality where the ‘here and now’ is always considered more real and thus true than any mediation. In this theoretical paper, we will critically examine this doubling of reality and the understandings of presence and mediation it implies. Further, we will investigate potential consequences of this understanding for research on the role of technology in reducing loneliness and social isolation.

There are several ways to approach the issue of virtual presence and technology that does not necessarily lead to a hierarchy of reality. Knorr-Cetina tries to update traditional interaction theory with insights from science and technology studies (STS), expanding Goffman’s idea of a situation to include ‘synthetic components’ to account for ‘global situations’ (2009). Lindemann and Schünemann draws on philosophical anthropology and Helmuth Plessner’s concept of ‘mediated immediacy’ to capture the actual experiences of telepresence (2020), while others have extended the sociological phenomenology of Alfred Schutz to include the online world in the lifeworld (Zhao 2015; Ollinaho 2018; Scriven 2018). Each try in their own way to account for telepresence or telecopresence without doubling reality. However, these theoretical solutions rarely analyse the origin of this doubling and its conditions of possibility. By turning to Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida and their critique of what they called ‘the metaphysics of presence’, we hope to provide a philosophical understanding of how and why we tend to relapse into thinking reality in plural and hierarchical terms.

For Heidegger, it is the understanding of Being in terms of beings, as substances with properties, and the corresponding separation of subject and object, mind and body, that constitute the basis of the problem. The subject becomes the centre of reference, making presence the necessary and authoritative starting point for relating to an external world of objects, in the form of true or false beliefs. Derrida radicalised this critique by focusing on language and the character of writing as a dividing structure that is always already there and that entails an inevitable production of difference in our meaning making practices. He analysed the privileging of speech over writing, also called phonocentrism, embedded in our culture and history as the major symptom of the metaphysics of presence, again underlining the inherent hierarchy of reality in such a view (the spoken word being more present, real and true than writing).

To clarify, our investigation into loneliness, presence and technology is based on three basic assumptions, which is also the structure of the rest of the paper: that there is some truth in the diagnosis proposed by Heidegger and Derrida, even today (A), that this diagnosis also applies to a lot of research on loneliness and teletechnologies (B) and finally that the metaphysics of presence risks distorting the understanding of both loneliness and the possibilities and limitations for abatement through teletechnologies (C). The main question we want to explore is what these distortions and their implications might be. This is the theme of the third section of the paper.

First, we will briefly introduce Plato’s allegory of the cave, which is an important background for both Heidegger and Derrida, before we present Heidegger’s analysis of the metaphysics of presence and Derrida’s radicalisation of Heidegger’s analysis. Then we will illustrate how their diagnosis pertain to research on various possibilities for reducing loneliness through teletechnology by analysing some examples from this research. Finally, we discuss some potential implications of the metaphysics of presence through the story about Greg, a constructed case based on our previous empirical research.

This paper does not aim to glorify solitude or downplay the negative health effects related to loneliness. Instead, our foundational assertion is simply that the question of whether Greg, or anyone in a similar situation, experiences loneliness, is an empirical question. And that if we want to properly understand loneliness and the potential for alleviating it through the use of teletechnologies, we might get off on the wrong foot if we carry with us assumptions suggesting the existence of ascending levels of reality and presence. This danger becomes more acute with the advent of increasingly ‘complex’ technologies for mediating presence (such as so-called ‘immersive technologies’), combined with the ubiquity of internet access and smartphones. How should we think about presence and reality in this context, when Plato’s cave has free Wi-Fi and the shadows on the wall are in full HD?

METAPHYSICS OF PRESENCE (A)

Allegory of the cave

Socrates: And now [...] let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened:—Behold! human beings living in a underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.

Glaucon: I see.

Socrates: And do you see [...] men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent.

Glaucon: You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners.

Socrates: Like ourselves, and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?

Glaucon: True, how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?

Socrates: And of the objects which are being carried in like manner they would only see the shadows?

Glaucon: Yes.

Socrates: And if they were able to converse with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?

Glaucon: Very true.

Socrates: And suppose further that the prison had an echo which came from the other side, would they not be sure to fancy when one of the passers-by spoke that the voice which they heard came from the passing shadow?

Glaucon: No question.

Socrates: To them, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images. (Plato 2017, 514a–515c)

In Plato’s famous ‘allegory of the cave’, those who are stuck in the cave are not present in the *real* world. They mistake the

shadows on the wall for reality, when the actual reality is outside the cave, or as Plato would have it, in the ideal forms and not in their representations. Unlike the unfortunates in Plato's cave, Greg is very much aware that there is a whole world outside his living room and that he can freely enter that world whenever he wants to. Despite these fundamental differences, it is easy to think of Greg as living in a cave like Plato's, captivated by the images on the TV. Perhaps it is also too easy to side with Plato in thinking that these representations are somehow less real than actual, physical, real-time presence?

One way to approach such a hierarchisation of reality is through the analysis of the 'metaphysics of presence' provided by philosophers Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida (Milne 2010; Miller 2012). A central point of reference for both is Plato and his idealistic theory of forms, but what they analyse and diagnose as metaphysics of presence is a persisting tendency in the whole Western philosophical tradition. This is the tendency to privilege presence as the only immediate and truthful access to reality, whereas all forms of mediations constitute mere approximations, derivations and second-rate realities with dubious truth value.

Heidegger and the question of being

"Entities are grasped in their Being as 'presence'; this means that they are understood with regard to a definite mode of time – the 'Present'" (Heidegger 1962, 47). For Heidegger, the philosophical tradition since Plato has forgotten the question of the meaning of Being and instead been caught up with questions of beings and their properties (Frede 2006, 45). The ontological difference between Being (as in to be) and existing entities (beings, or what is) is crucial for Heidegger, and when the meaning of Being is reduced to the being of entities and understood on the basis of things, objects or substances, we are falling into ontology and trapped in the present.

"The question of Being does not achieve its true concreteness until we have carried through the process of destroying the ontological tradition" (Heidegger 1962, 49). The problem with 'the ontological tradition' is that it is removed from how we actually experience the world as something 'always already'. Instead, it makes up a distanced and theoretical view of the world as something static and external that confronts us from the outside. This is metaphysics, as it makes one mode of existing and relating to the world into the basis for *any* relation to the world. Heidegger believed that this mode was in fact derived from a more primordial attitude, which is the everyday attitude as we experience it through our practices.

Besides Plato, one of the most classical and well-known formulations of these metaphysical ideas is the substance dualism of Descartes, where there is a radical separation between subject and object (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*) (2008). This makes the question of how a subject can know the world of objects the most important philosophical question (Taylor 1995, 34; Bhaskar 2008, 38), where the centre of reference becomes the subject. Our relations with the world thus takes the form of true or false beliefs, where the criterion of truth being whether or not a belief (internal to the subject) corresponds to reality (external to the subject). This means that both subjectivity and objectivity are constituted in their separation, which has been a central problem in our philosophical and scientific tradition.

This is also one of the core issues in the metaphysics of presence, since such a separation makes presence (in space and time) the necessary and privileged basis for our dealings with our surroundings. "The understanding of Being as presencing takes

what-is as something with which we can deal, something here and now which we can literally grasp, turn to and fro, modify to suit our needs, and so forth" (White 1996, 150). This understanding opens the possibility of creating hierarchies of reality based on physical or perceived distance from an ideal and transparent 'here and now'.

Heidegger's own thinking is a sustained effort to overcome metaphysics by meticulous phenomenological analysis of everyday practical experience, and where the ultimate goal is to approach the question of the meaning of Being. In *Being and Time*, he develops an analytic of human beings as Dasein (being there) through exploring Dasein's various existential modalities and how we as Daseins disclose and relate to our surroundings in these different modalities (Heidegger 1962). The essence of Dasein is our openness to being, and this openness is structured as care. We care for our surroundings, our fellow human beings, and we are cared for in turn. Care is a fundamentally practical, relational and temporal orientation towards the world, and this orientation is our primary mode of existing. From this primordial ground, we can adopt various attitudes in how we use and relate to our surroundings, such as a more theoretical, instrumental and derived attitude. This derived attitude is how Heidegger perceives the attitude of the sciences, which in his view is also the defining characteristic of modernity (Heidegger, Young and Haynes 2002).

The purpose of the construction Dasein is to approach our way of being in a more truthful manner than the separation of subject and object allows for. In our primary relations with the world, there is no such separation, according to Heidegger. That is not how we experience the world or other people, and thus the presence of the subject in a 'here and now' cannot be the criterion of reality or the truth.

Derrida and the presence of difference

Heidegger tried to escape metaphysics by avoiding the vocabulary of metaphysics, substituting metaphysical concepts with new ones, such as Dasein. Derrida, however, believed such an escape to be an illusion, since we are forced to relate to metaphysical concepts, even when avoiding them or substituting them. "[T]he Heideggerean destruction of metaphysics" (Derrida 1978, 280) is thus not an overcoming or abandonment, but turns out to be yet another of its iterations. "We have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is foreign to this history" (Derrida 1978, 280). For Derrida, the signature move of metaphysical thinking is the attempt to locate and fixate a centre, a 'transcendental signifier' and "[t]he history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix [...] is the determination of Being as presence" (Derrida 1978, 279).

Derrida mentions several examples of these transcendental signifiers, among which we also find Heidegger's prime targets of attack, 'substance' and 'subject', but also 'presence' which is 'the centre' at the centre of this paper. "According to Derrida, the metaphysics of presence is inseparable from a hierarchical system of binary opposites where one term is privileged and the second is denounced as parasitic" (Milne 2010, 13). Such as presence/absence, real/representation, original/copy, and so on. In his biography of Derrida, Peter Salmon comments that despite the "great destabilizers of presence, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Freud" (2020, 117), metaphysics continues, and that Derrida uses "metaphysical terms to interrogate – to deconstruct – metaphysics" (2020, 117). However, Derrida does not believe "that we could get along without a centre", but that "the center is a

function, not a being – a reality, but a function” (Derrida quoted in Salmon 2020, 121). This is in line with Heidegger and his refusal to reduce reality to a question of beings and their properties, and it is a rejection of the metaphysical dream of ‘full presence’ (Derrida 1978, 292). Deconstruction can thus be summed up as “simply a question of (...) being alert to the implications, to the historical sedimentation of the language which we use” (Derrida quoted in Salmon 2020, 121).

As we can discern, language assumes a pivotal role in Derrida’s perspective, where he embraces the fundamental tenet of Saussurean linguistics, which posits language as an arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. However, he diverges from structuralism by eschewing its ahistorical spatiality and its dependence on discontinuities, radical ruptures and origins (exemplified in concepts like ‘structure’ and ‘sign’). Furthermore, Derrida criticises Saussure’s phonocentrism, where speech is favoured over writing (Derrida 1997, 30). Language thus becomes a relational structure of differences that is always already there, in place and in play, and which we cannot escape. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes: “However the topic is considered, the problem of language has never been simply one problem amongst others” (Derrida 1997, 6). More specifically, Derrida is concerned with *writing* and how it already from the time of Plato (1925, 274c-277a) has been seen as a threat to truth as presence and self-presence (Derrida 1997, 6).

We are again entering Plato’s cave and the theory of forms, where representations stand in a mimetic hierarchy to the original form, making even speech representations of thought and writing into mere representations of representations. Questioning the primacy of speech, Derrida also questions the primacy of presence, whether in the form of subject, consciousness or cogito, thus extending the critique of phonocentrism to a critique of logocentrism (Spivak 1997, lxviii). Counter to Plato (and most of the Western philosophical tradition), Derrida considers writing as the condition of possibility for the existence of ideal objects, like Kant’s synthetic a priori, or Husserl’s ideal objects of science, not the other way around, where writing is just symbols of prior mental processes (Derrida 1989). The existence of writing (in some form or other) is what makes these objects ideal and it is what makes it possible to transmit them from one person to another or one generation to the next, without requiring presence. Writing is thus also the condition of possibility for historicity (Derrida 1997, 27).

It is in this context that Derrida introduces one of his most counterintuitive ideas, the concept of ‘arche-writing’:

I would wish rather to suggest that the alleged derivativeness of writing, however real and massive, was possible only on one condition: that the ‘original’, ‘natural’, etc. language had never existed, never been intact and untouched by writing, that it had itself always been a writing (Derrida 1997, 56).

By arche-writing, Derrida understands a structure that is always already there, even in cultures without writing. This is reminiscent of Heidegger and his temporal care structure, where we are always already thrown into the world. The concept of arche-writing is closely related to two other arche-Derridaen concepts, *différance* and *the trace*, which both point towards the lack of origins or the absence of presence. In Derrida’s own words:

“The trace is not only the disappearance of origin [...] it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin” (1997, 61). This is the

structure of language, always indebted to the “impossible presence of the absent origin” (1978, 292), as arche-writing, “at work not only in the form and substance of graphic expression, but also in those of non-graphic expression” (1997, 60). And this is also the meaning of ‘différance’, as the delay which precedes distinction, dichotomies and naming: “the Absolute is present only in being deferred-delayed (différant) without respire, this impotence and this impossibility are given in a primordial and pure consciousness of Difference” (1989, 153). It is the always already, the absence of presence and the free play of signifiers, debunking “the myth of consciousness” (1997, 166), and the 2000-year-old philosopher’s dream of presence and immediacy.

We find traces of this metaphysics of presence all around us, in our language (expressions like “I saw it with my own eyes” or “I was there”), our metaphors (‘virtual reality’, ‘real time’, ‘IRL’) and our imaginaries (digital detox to become more present and mindful, etc). Thus, there is no reason to believe that this tendency is not also affecting how we understand the effects of tele-technologies for alleviating loneliness and social isolation.

EXAMPLES AND ILLUSTRATIONS (B)

What is displaced?

A major concern in early studies of internet use and online communication was “[w]hether the Internet is increasing or decreasing social involvement” (Kraut *et al* 1998, 1017). Several studies concluded that increased internet use was correlated with a decrease in sociability (Kraut *et al* 1998; Nie and Hillygus 2002), cementing a ‘displacement hypothesis’ saying that internet use displaced other types of social involvements (Nie and Hillygus 2002; Nie 2001). Quantitatively speaking, the amount of time is fixed (eg, as 24 hours a day), and if you spend 1-hour chatting to a stranger online, you have 1 hour less to spend chatting with your next-door neighbour. However, when presenting the conclusions from some of these studies, the authors reveal their underlying view of mediated presence: “more time spent on the Internet meant less time spent socializing” (Nie 2001, 425). This view effectively posits internet use and socialising as mutually excluding, closing off the possibility of social internet use. According to these studies: “The amount of time spent on the Internet is the key” (Nie 2001, 425), but unwittingly they slide from quantitative to qualitative. The displacement thesis is presented in quantitative terms as a question of time, while the implicit conclusion is that real time is more valuable than virtual time, affirming a latent hierarchy of reality. Later studies opened the possibility for social internet use (Wellman *et al* 2003), but without getting rid of the ontological hierarchy between real and virtual or actual and potential, relegating internet to a realm of potentiality, while ‘reality’ is actual (Neves *et al* 2019, 51).

In some of the ‘displacement’ studies, they also found that increased internet use, decreased people’s sense of well-being (Kraut *et al* 1998). Such findings are more difficult to interpret, since they involve more variables and more explicit qualitative judgements. For example, “[t]he aversive state of loneliness is associated with interpretative biases and withdrawal behavior that influence the way that lonely people employ social technologies, indicating that they are more likely to use social technologies in a way that displaces offline friendships and communications” (Nowland, Necka and Cacioppo 2018, 71). There are also huge differences between different age groups (Nowland, Necka and Cacioppo 2018), related to the strength of the social ties between those interacting (Kraut *et al* 2002) and between socioeconomic groups (Nie 2001, 51). According to Lindemann and Schünemann, “[s]ociological discourse about

communication technologies often concentrates on phenomena deemed pathological” (Lindemann and Schünemann 2020, 627), such as loneliness and social isolation, and that “the prevailing sociological perspective is characterized by an apparent indifference towards the actual experience of using such technology” (Lindemann and Schünemann 2020, 628). Could the metaphysics of presence thwart our potential for understanding ‘the actual experience of using such technology’ and its relation to loneliness and social isolation?

As if present

Attempting to unify several conceptualisations of telepresence, virtual presence and mediated presence in the term ‘presence’, Kwan Min Lee provides the following definition: “a psychological state in which the virtuality of experience is unnoticed” (2004, 32). Lee is conscious to avoid words such as illusion in the definition, which would imply a dichotomy between presence and virtual presence, but the dichotomy is nevertheless reinstated, only on the level of experience. If presence implies virtual experience, there must also be situations of non-virtual or actual experience, which brings us back into the cave.

Already in 1997, Lombard and Ditton wrote an extensive review of conceptualization of presence in relation to media technology, where they synthesised various definitions into their own general definition of presence: “the perceptual illusion of nonmediation” (1997). They reserve the word presence for situations where some kind of medium is involved and explains the definition thus: “An ‘illusion of nonmediation’ occurs when a person fails to perceive or acknowledge the existence of a medium in his/her communication environment and responds as he/she would if the medium were not there” (Lombard and Ditton 1997). This effectively points to the possibility of non-mediated communication, or immediate perception or experience, and their definition of presence could thus also be the definition of the metaphysics of presence.

One of the lessons we could learn from Derrida is to take the words, concepts and language we use as something ‘always already’, and thus also as something always already mediated. Even when we talk face to face, the words we use and their meaning are always deferred. The words exist independent of us, and their relation to any meaning is purely arbitrary, conditioned by culture, history and the constitution of those listening and interpreting. There is nothing immediate, transparent or purely present in even the simplest utterances. We have never been present, and even if digitally mediated interaction might involve both spatial and temporal displacements, there is no original, pure and direct interaction in the first place. We always bring with us our language, culture, history, identity and memory. Perhaps the relevant question is not whether there is a medium involved, but rather what the affordances are, of the medium at hand (Nordtug and Johannessen 2023)?

The real and its double

In one of the most read books on loneliness and the effects of technology from recent years, Sherry Turkle begins the introduction by stating: “Technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies. These days, it suggests substitutions that put the real on the run” (Turkle 2011, 1). Here, there is clearly a distinction at work between real and ‘real’, where technology can substitute the former with the latter. In the second paragraph, we can read: “Digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of

friendship.” (2011, 1). Again we are caught in the vocabulary of illusions, but in what exactly does the illusion consist?

This partitioning of reality is pervasive, and we find another example already in the title of a paper from 2022: “Online social connections as surrogates of face-to-face interactions [...]” (Marinucci *et al* 2022). The word surrogate usually means substitute, or someone or something acting on behalf of someone or something else (Merriam-Webster 2023a), and using the word implies a certain hierarchy of existence. Later in the paper, the authors write: “When adequate face-to-face social connection satiated the psychological needs, online communication could not add further to psychological well-being, with this highlighting the limits of online interactions as subordinate surrogates of offline ones” (Marinucci *et al* 2022, 6). Here, it gets clarified that there is not only a distinction between online and offline interactions, but the former is ranked lower in the hierarchy, being ‘subordinate’. Even if we discard the idea of the metaphysics of presence as being metaphysical, it is clear that we are constantly caught in a language structure where presence is cemented as primary.

In a randomised controlled study comparing the effect of social support in-person or via text messages, the researchers ask: “Can text messaging compete with in-person interactions?” (Holtzman *et al* 2017). The overall results of the study are not surprisingly that in-person social support is more effective than social support via text messaging, but how can they at all be compared? We have the expression that you cannot compare apples and oranges, based on the assumption that what is to be compared must belong to the same category or be at least somewhat similar for the comparing to make sense. Text messaging and in-person interactions are clearly two qualitatively different things, but in this study they get related in a way that assumes that they are somehow the same. The common ground here seems to be interpersonal communication and social support, but if an underlying premise is that one of the elements are not really communication or actually interpersonal, then this ‘competition’ is skewed at the outset.

Sociable conversation

“Sociology’s traditional stance on interaction implies that physical co-presence provides the standard by which to judge the importance, the form and the quality of all other varieties of exchange” (Cerulo 1997, 49). There is a long research tradition that has promoted the importance of authentic face-to-face relationships as the foremost and strongest form of social togetherness and thus the most preventive against loneliness (Knorr-Cetina 2009; Zhao 2015; Ollinaho 2018). Collins has combined the work of Emile Durkheim and Erving Goffman into a general theory of interaction rituals (2004). In the perspective of Collins, society is held together by the mechanism of social rituals. In ‘successful’ interaction rituals, there is an intensification of shared experience, what Durkheim called collective effervescence. The degree of ‘success’ achieved by social rituals is a way of describing the qualitative dimension of social integration. The most basic of all interaction rituals is sociable conversation. Successful interaction rituals are important in forming social bonds, providing a sense of meaning and belonging, while people who do not get these experiences become demoralised and depressed (Weininger, Lareau and Lizardo 2018). Scholarship is in general agreement that interaction rituals are most likely to be successful if they are face to face rather than technologically mediated, as face-to-face interaction rituals are considered ‘full channel’ interactions, which facilitate the synchronisation of focus and emotions (Johannessen 2023; Collins 2020).

“In our culture the face-to-face encounter is the ideal paradigm of the meeting of minds. Communication seems most complete and successful where the person is physically present ‘in’ the message. This physical presence is supposed to be the guarantor of authenticity: you can look your interlocutor in the eye and search for tacit signs of truthfulness or falsehood, where context and tone permit a subtler interpretation of the spoken word” (Feenberg 1989, 22).

Face-to-face interaction is therefore considered the essential medium for interaction rituals and, as such, has been the primary research focus of interaction rituals studies. There are exceptions to this tendency (Lindemann and Schünemann 2020), and the past 15 years have seen studies applying interaction ritual theory to technology-mediated interactions via mobile phones, social media, discussion boards, online dating platforms and live-streaming services, demonstrating, in all cases, that technology-mediated interaction are capable of producing group solidarity and emotional energy (Johannessen 2023). Importantly, however, these studies generally maintain that face-to-face interactions are more likely to lead to successful interaction rituals and thereby prevent loneliness.

If we go back to the ‘displacement hypothesis’, there is not only that online communication might displace offline communication but also a fear that “even if people use the Internet to talk with close friends and family, these on-line discussions might displace *higher quality* face-to-face and telephone conversation” (Kraut *et al* 2002, 50, emphasis added). This implies a related hierarchy of technology and presence, or levels of telepresence, based on how well the technology in question mediates presence. It is taken for granted that face-to-face conversation always and everywhere is of ‘higher quality’ than ‘online discussions’. However, we insist that this is an empirical question, susceptible to contextual and situational factors, not a premise for the investigation. By using Greg as a device or prism to shed light on various aspects of the privileging of presence in the context of loneliness and technology, we hope to illuminate some potential implications of this primacy of presence. We have ordered the discussions of possible implications into four domains: ontology, epistemology, ethics and politics.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS (C)

Presence and reality (ontology)

Once in a while, Greg is invited to his sister for dinner, or she comes by to help him buy new clothes or adjust his hearing aid or just to say hi. Then he talks about things he has seen and heard on TV, consequently referring to his favorite celebrities by their first name when he recounts their stories or shares their favorite pasta recipe. Just as he would talk about his friends.

In this field of research, one would refer to Greg’s relations with the TV celebrities as ‘parasocial interaction’ (Horton and Wohl 1956), where para can be taken to mean ‘abnormal’, ‘associated in a subsidiary or accessory capacity’ or ‘closely resembling/ almost’ (Merriam-Webster 2023b). This is echoed in Lombard and Ditton, where they write: “Studies have shown that people respond to interpersonal distance cues in [...], and even talk to [...], the pictures of people on the television screen. The mediated nature of the ‘interaction’ is ignored and the media personality is *incorrectly* perceived as a social actor” (1997, emphasis added). And it resembles the definition of presence provided by Lee, where “the virtuality of experience is unnoticed” (2004, 32). These are all instances of a doubling of reality, with an added hierarchy where the original is ranked higher than the copy, or ‘the virtual’, like in Plato’s cave.

Supposing that we want to understand Greg’s (or anyone else’s) “actual experience of using such technology” (Lindemann

and Schünemann 2020, 628), we miss our target if we start out from an ordering of all possible experiences in a hierarchy where some experiences are more real than others. We cannot a priori close off the possibility of Greg having his social needs met by watching TV. If we follow Heidegger, we would have a better chance if we started from the experience itself, instead of starting with a separation of subject and object, or a division between real and virtual. This ontological division only leads to epistemological problems of correspondence, as criticised by Heidegger and Derrida. In this case, the problem is that if all types of interaction are judged by copresence as the given standard, how can we consider Greg to be anything but lonely? From such a basis, it is not even possible to ask the question of whether or not Greg is lonely as an empirical question; it becomes ontologically given.

Presence as positive (epistemology)

Greg does not have a lot of friends and his health is not the best, so he does not go out very often.

When translating observations or sense data into meaningful and logically coherent sentences, the meaning of words and concepts matters a lot. After observing Greg, we conclude: He does not have a lot of friends. This is a negative description, a sociology of lack, where Greg himself might have a very different view of the situation, perhaps considering a lot of people to be his friends, even though he never meets them. Besides, it is not only Greg that is described here, but implicitly also the norm in the society in which we find Greg. People have friends, are generally in good health and they do go out every now and then. In this case, what is present points to what is absent. What presents itself is thus not given, even when you are there, directly receiving it.

Whether you tend to have a positive view on the possibilities for technology to alleviate loneliness, or a negative view, it is equally difficult to avoid being trapped in what is given. If we ask Greg whether he is satisfied with his life, if he feels lonely or if he feels social when watching TV, we are asking from ‘a general point of view’. And we assume that he will answer in the same key, based on a partly shared understanding of the concepts and the reality involved. However, in asking these questions we must also analyse what is taken for granted in the position from which we are asking, recognising the conditions and origins of this general point of view. Such a reflective attitude can provide a potentially critical and negative perspective, allowing absence to enter the picture. Taking the world at face value implies being caught in a thinking and a language that might influence our research in a more fundamental way than issues of method, biased data or prejudices of the individual researchers.

There are three basic meanings of presence: presence as the temporal now, as being present in some spatial here, and present as gift, or the given (Rosset 2020, 79). The present is what is given, which is the positive, as in positivism—what is given in experience, present to a presence in the present. A lot of research, including research on loneliness and social isolation, are committed to the basic assumption in positivism, namely to study what is positively given, what is present or that presents itself. This is often a necessary commitment, but it also entails an empiricism that rules out negativity and criticism and thus risks affirming what is given and confirming status quo, including elements we might dislike or would want to change, such as loneliness.

“I’m doing fine watching shadows on the wall” (ethics)

Greg is always invited to his sister to celebrate Christmas, but after their mother died some years ago, he always declines the invitation,

saying that he prefers to stay home. What does he do at home? He watches TV. On the second day of Christmas there is also a dinner party at his sisters, and for this event he always shows up, happy, well-dressed and usually full of praise for his sisters cooking. Why does he want to stay home alone on Christmas eve?

The first time he said to his sister that he rather wanted to stay home, she did not accept it at first, but tried to convince him in all sorts of ways. Underlying her efforts was a clear idea that there must be something wrong with him, that he was suffering from some sort of false consciousness, that he did not know his own good. No one wants to be alone on Christmas eve, to watch TV!

We all suffer from similar impulses, when we encounter people who do things we consider harmful or less valuable, and we often tend to categorise it as somehow pathological, implying that the person in question is not in full control of his or her faculties, or that they act on false information or are simply being misled by someone else. We have difficulties accepting that normal, healthy and sane people can make seemingly absurd choices. There can be all sorts of reasons for this, but when it comes to presence, reality and loneliness, it seems obvious to make a connection to the metaphysics of presence.

First, there is the tendency to privilege face-to-face presence in social interactions, reducing images on TV to a second order reality, and watching TV at best a second-rate form of social interaction. And then comes the troubling aspect of accepting that someone would actively avoid face-to-face interaction in favour of mediated presence through a TV screen. In the Socratic tradition, there are only two options, either you know the truth and what is right, and act accordingly, or if you do not act accordingly, you do not know the real truth or real good. This way of thinking is deeply engrained in us and this is one of the reasons we are provoked by seemingly irrational, or even self-destructive behaviour.

The point is not that watching TV and having social encounters with TV hosts is the same as meeting someone face-to-face and interacting with that person live and direct. It is rather the opposite, that these are two qualitatively different things, and as such they cannot be compared on an equal ground, without mediations, translations and distortions. When ranking the two in a hierarchy of what is most real, we implicitly take one of them (face to face) as more fundamental and important than the other (mediated presence and mediated social experiences). We unintentionally take face-to-face encounters as the ground for the comparison, effectively invalidating mediated presence and social experiences as anything but second-rate reality. Such uncritical inferences are generally not acceptable, at least not in research, since it risks distorting the results, creating bias. To dismiss Greg as mad, or as exceptions that proves the rule, is not only incapacitating and unethical but it is also opportunities lost for understanding exceptional cases. It reduces diversity and implies a general flattening of differences.

“All the lonely people” (politics)

Some years ago, Greg bought a smart phone and a tablet, and used his mobile phone subscription to access the Internet, but the result was that he had even less contact with his family than before. His hands are shaking quite badly, so he was not able to use the touch screens in a meaningful way, and he had zero digital competence, so the whole idea of internet, email or social media was incomprehensible. In the end he got a new “non-smart” phone, with a simple subscription and finally managed to send text-messages. His sister helped him store all the important phone numbers in his life on the phone, for calling a taxi, his brother, sister, his neighbors and a couple of other relatives. Less than ten contacts, where half of them were contacted once

a year, with a text-message congratulating them on their birthday. If Greg was lonely and could use some help, one of the loneliness reducing initiatives taken by the local municipality is to “help old people to socialize on digital platforms” (Anon).

There are at least two paradoxes related to this which are intertwined and that touches on the metaphysics of presence: Why promote digital technologies and digital interaction for groups of people where a large segment of the group in focus will be unable to use the technologies promoted? And second, digital technologies are seen as part of the solution, constituting new possibilities and ways of connecting people, but at the same time, mediated presence are seen as second-rate, unable to live up to face-to-face-interactions (Jentoft 2023). Why promote a solution while simultaneously believing it to be second rate? If one believes that face-to-face meetings are the gold standard of interaction and if we take the difficulties of various target groups in using digital technologies seriously, why not turn the tables and promote face-to-face meetings between younger, abler and more digitally competent people, and ‘all the lonely people’? Policy-makers apparently understand that some people are lonely and some of the potential causes, but the suggested remedy is also the poison creating loneliness (Jentoft and Haldar 2023). Perhaps they should start asking the question of why some people are lonely, instead of going straight to the question of how we can help all the lonely people to become less lonely? Assuming the answer to the first question will affect the answer to the second.

CONCLUSION

“Putting the immediate aside and referring it to another world that holds the key to its meaning and reality is [...] the main concern of metaphysics” (Rosset 2020, 65). This definition from Rosset captures a fundamental problem with the metaphysics of presence in relation to research on loneliness and technology: that mediation, representation and ‘the virtual’ remain ‘shadows on the wall’, and thus poor reflections of the real, actual and present reality of face-to-face interactions. If we follow Heidegger and Derrida, the metaphysics of presence is not something we can easily overcome. As historical beings (always already), open to our surroundings (care) and thrown into a sedimented language structure, we carry this metaphysics of presence with us whether we like it or not. But in the spirit of deconstruction, we can be more or less alert to its implications. In the case of understanding loneliness and technologically mediated presence, such an alertness is imperative. We cannot afford to judge Greg and those like him as lonely or not lonely based on metaphysical habits, nor implement policies based on the same biased view of presence and reality. Their experiences are also of this world.

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NOTE

1. An analytical construct based on previous interviews and observations.

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