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# Loneliness and Ressentiment

ABSTRACT: *Loneliness, while a common human experience, is something to which people often respond quite differently. Here, I examine how an individual's social position, as well as his socialization into a particular cultural milieu, can shape his response to the fact of his loneliness (as well as the features of human existence that loneliness makes salient). Specifically, I argue that in cases where the individual experiencing loneliness has been socialized to disvalue the features of existence that loneliness makes salient (e.g., our dependence on and vulnerability to others) and/or to feel entitled to the social goods that they are, or perceive themselves to be, lacking (e.g., recognition or intimate connection), loneliness may catalyze the vicious, extremist attitude of ressentiment. This analysis allows us to see how loneliness may play a role in catalyzing vicious, extremist attitudes—though I contend that loneliness never* warrants *such attitudes.*

KEYWORDS: loneliness, emotion, ressentiment, vulnerability, intimacy, misogyny

Loneliness, while a common human experience, is something to which people often respond quite differently. For some, the pain of loneliness serves as impetus for social connection. For others, it can be debilitating, perpetuating isolation and social disengagement. And while most tend to experience loneliness as either a fact of life or an occasion for sadness, others experience loneliness as an occasion for anger, even resentment. In this article, I examine how an individual's social position, as well as his socialization into a particular cultural milieu, can shape his response to the fact of his loneliness (as well as the features of human existence that loneliness makes salient). Specifically, I argue that in cases where the individual experiencing loneliness has been socialized to disvalue the features of existence that loneliness makes salient (e.g., our dependence on and vulnerability to others) and/or to feel *entitled* to the social goods that they are, or perceive themselves to be, lacking (e.g., recognition or intimate connection), loneliness may catalyze the vicious, extremist attitude of ressentiment. This analysis allows us to see how loneliness may play a role in catalyzing vicious, extremist attitudes—though I contend that loneliness never *warrants* such attitudes.

Below, I begin by offering an account of loneliness and its deliverances. This investigation into the conditions of loneliness calls our attention to an array of "emotional susceptibilities" with a "second-personal structure" (Darwall 2024: 1) that lie at the root of experiences of loneliness. After then going on to demonstrate how our responses to loneliness can be shaped by our socialization, I focus on problematic, extremist responses to loneliness, responses I argue result in part from the way in which the individuals harboring those attitudes are socialized. To illuminate this dynamic, I then analyze a concrete instance of this phenomenon:

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loneliness as experienced by those who identify as incels (or "involuntary celibates").

## 1. The Origins of Loneliness

Philosophical treatments of loneliness approach the issue from various directions, inquiring into how loneliness originates (Arendt 1951; Cacioppo and Patrick 2008; Svendsen 2017; Creasy 2023); whether it is a subjective feeling of which one is necessarily aware (Svendsen 2017) or can be unfelt (Tietjen and Furtak 2021); whether it is a transitory state of mind necessarily tied to specific facts of one's situation or can be a persistent, existential feeling that shapes how one experiences one's situation (Ratcliffe 2008; Tietjen and Furtak 2021); and so on. For present purposes, I put more contentious cases of loneliness (such as unfelt loneliness and existential loneliness) to the side and attend only to loneliness as "a subjective phenomenon… experienced as a lack of satisfying relationships to others" (Svendsen 2017: 22). Below, I offer a characterization of this commonplace form of loneliness and its origins, attending to a wide variety of circumstances in which it can arise. In short, I explore ways in which relationships can fail to satisfy such that they produce loneliness, paying special attention to failures of intimacy.

The phenomenon of loneliness I treat here is a painful subjective feeling that results from a desire for recognition or connection together with a lack of recognition or connection, whether perceived or actual.[1] Loneliness will arise, first, when an individual's need to have her worth as a person recognized goes unmet—as it will, for example, when she feels that she does not matter in herself (Setiya 2022: 56). In a case like this, loneliness results from a failure, whether real or perceived, to secure basic recognition: acknowledgment of one's worth as a person. This may occur, for example, when an individual's social interactions are limited or superficial. When her social interactions and relationships (or lack thereof) fail to reflect her worth back to her—that is, the fact of her mattering *qua* person—she will feel lonely (Setiya 2022: 56).[2] Additionally, loneliness can arise when an individual secures basic recognition, but without another of her needs being met: her need to be acknowledged and valued in her *particularity*—to be seen and affirmed as the *particular*, empirical person that she is (Creasy 2023; Yao 2023). In cases like these, loneliness results from a failure (real or perceived) *not* of basic recognition, but of particular recognition. This can occur when someone, despite having loving, affirmative relationships with people who recognize and affirm her worth as a person, does not feel sufficiently seen, understood, or valued as the individual she understands herself to be. Otherwise put, the individual who suffers loneliness due to a lack of particular recognition does not feel seen and/or valued for *who she is*, where "who she is" includes core features of her personality such as character traits,

[1] In the first two sections, for reasons of flow, I often use the language of needs *actually* failing to be met. But loneliness may arise even if an individual merely *perceives* her needs as unmet.

[2] While it's difficult to sort out how comprehensive Setiya intends for his account of loneliness to be, I take him to be developing a general theory of loneliness. As such, it's insufficient. See Creasy 2023.

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longstanding dispositions, central values, and life-orienting commitments. In cases involving this felt lack of acknowledgment, the individual's friends—the people with whom she has loving, affirmative relationships, including relatives and lovers—either fail to reflect core features of the individual's self-conception back to her, fail to value those features in the right kind of way (i.e., these features do not function as *reasons* for the friend's positive evaluation of her), or both. Notice that the friend's failure to reflect these features back to the individual may result from the friend's inability (and sometimes, their failure) to apprehend these features in the first place. After all, if the friend is unable to apprehend these, they will also be unable to value those features in the right kind of way: *qua* core features of the particular individual that are valuable and worthy of appreciation *in themselves*, independently of the friend's love for the lonely individual.

Additionally, loneliness can occur when certain of an individual's social needs (apart from the aforementioned recognition needs)—especially those she understands as central to her self-realization—go unmet. Here, I construe social needs broadly, as needs we require others to meet. In such cases, it is a lack of (particular kinds of) connection to others (whether real or perceived) that produces loneliness. (Note that while recognition and significance breakdowns are varieties of connection breakdown—a failure to connect in the desired way with others, which simply requires that some social need goes unmet—the social needs frustrated in recognition and significance breakdowns are existentially basic.)

As an example of loneliness resulting from an unmet social need, imagine an academic philosopher with loving friends who, though they acknowledge her worth as a person and value who she is, remain unable to meet her need for a certain level or kind of intellectual engagement. If this need for intellectual engagement goes unmet by others in her life, she will feel (among other things) lonely—all the more so if she understands intellectual engagement as requisite for her self-realization. (This individual will also likely feel other things: boredom, a lack of fulfillment, intellectual restlessness, and so on. But none of these captures the negatively valenced feeling of loneliness that may arise as a result of the world's silence in the face of her need.) The more social needs one possesses and the more idiosyncratic these needs are, the more occasions there may be for the individual to experience loneliness.

While many of the social needs an individual requires others to meet (the frustration of which tends to provoke loneliness) will be idiosyncratic, others will be more basic and thus more common. As one example, take the widespread human need to process or metabolize our inner lives and experiences, which typically requires having the intelligibility of our inner lives and experiences reflected back to us in the understanding of another.[3] Securing understanding of this sort requires others not only to grasp my experience *intellectually* (perhaps I am a new parent and my friend has read about the difficulties of becoming a parent), but also to "humanely understand" (Bailey 2020) the experience: to "have a first-hand appreciation" (2020: 57) of that experience. In the case of emotionally laden

[3] Thanks to Bernard Reginster for suggesting I discuss this.

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experiences, this will importantly involve their having an "emotional response… concordant with" my own (2020: 58). My experience must resonate *affectively* with them.

This social need (and its frustration, whether real or perceived, as a cause of loneliness) shows up vividly in the case of traumatic experiences. Think of the very many women who reported feeling less alone after sharing their experiences of sexual harassment or assault as part of the #MeToo movement, as well as the loneliness that they reported experiencing prior to disclosing their experiences. And while this need shows up readily in the case of negative (or negatively valenced) experiences, notice that it may also show up in the context of positive (or positively valenced) experiences. Imagine a first-generation student who experiences feelings of deep fulfillment and pride after graduating from college. Notwithstanding the positivity of the experience, if this student feels that there aren't people with whom she is in relationship who can understand and help her process this experience, she will tend to feel lonely as a result. In sum, regardless of the quality of the experience, it will often be profoundly alienating to have experiences that one believes are unintelligible to others.

Finally, let me turn our attention to another basic and extremely widespread social need: the need to matter to others.[4] This is the need that individuals have not only to matter "*in themselves*, regardless of their merits" (Setiya 2022: 56, emphasis mine), but also to matter to others, where that involves playing a significant role in others' lives. To oversimplify considerably: Just as we will tend to experience loneliness if certain of our social needs go unmet, so too will we tend to experience loneliness if we do not feel needed by others (in the way we desire to be needed).

Let's return to the case of the lonely academic philosopher. Rather than imagining this case from the perspective of the philosopher, however, let's occupy the perspective of her partner. Imagine that her partner desires to be one of her main philosophical interlocuters, someone with whom she develops and works out her ideas. Let's imagine, too, that her partner used to occupy that position in her life but, having stopped reading philosophy closely in college ten years ago, now finds himself unable to contribute to her intellectual and philosophical development as he used to do—though he is keenly aware that other friends of hers can (and do). It is my contention that, even if the partner perceives all of his other social needs as being met (e.g., his relationships affirm his worth as a person, his friends affirm his particularity, and his other social needs are satisfied), he will tend to feel lonely insofar as he feels unable to play a central role in her intellectual and philosophical development and, in virtue of this, does not feel that he matters to his partner as he would like to matter. Otherwise put, if the philosopher's partner feels unable to fulfill the vital role in his partner's life that he desires to fulfill, he will be lonely *despite* the fact that his other social needs are met.

When we feel that we do not matter to a friend in the way we wish to matter, the resulting loneliness can be heartbreaking—even more so when we perceive that others can fulfill the role in the friend's life we desire to fulfill, but do not (or no

[4] Thanks to Ruth Rebecca Tietjen for suggesting I develop my account in this direction.

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longer do). Take the familiar example of a mother whose son, long reliant on her for affection and consolation, comes eventually to rely on a long-term romantic partner for these things instead. Rather than calling his mother about his bad day, he now calls his partner; instead of seeking the comfort of his mother's arms when something goes wrong, he now seeks comfort from his partner. In this case, let's stipulate that mother and son continue to share a loving, affirmative relationship: the mother feels assured of both her son's love and her continued value to him. If the mother in this case comes to believe that she no longer matters to her son as she once did (i.e., that she no longer occupies the same significance in his life) yet retains a desire to so matter, she may become lonely.

As illustrated by the examples above, individuals come to feel that they matter not only by securing recognition of their worth, but by *actually, concretely* mattering to others, where that involves playing a role of significance in others' lives, a role that those others must also see as significant. To alleviate the loneliness of the mother from above, an acknowledgment of her value—an acknowledgment that she matters *in herself*, even as *the particular person she is*—is not enough. Instead, what is required is that she feels she matters *to her son* in the right kind of way: that she is an indispensable part of his life, that she plays a vital function of the kind she desires. To feel that she genuinely matters to him as she would like to matter requires both (1) various forms of concrete engagement with her son (in this case, actually meeting certain of her son's needs) and (2) her occupation of a position of significance within her son's life, where this involves his seeing her as playing a significant role in his life (i.e., his seeing her as mattering in the way she desires to matter from within his own perspective on his life). Notice that (1) can exist without (2). That is, it is possible for an individual to *in fact* play a significant role in another person's life—for an individual to meet another's needs, even actively contributing to his flourishing—without the person whose needs are being met seeing her as especially significant. Despite actually playing a vital function in the life of another, such an individual may fail to feel that she matters properly to him. And as a result, she may feel lonely.

Before moving on to the deliverances of loneliness (i.e., what experiences of loneliness show or suggest to the individual), let me draw our attention to a few key points whose relevance will become clear shortly. First, notice that in cases of loneliness resulting from recognitive failures, the lonely individual possesses a desire for acknowledgment that goes unsatisfied. Similarly, in cases of loneliness resulting from failures of connection (including a failure to matter to others), the lonely individual possesses an unsatisfied desire for a particular form of connection with others (one of which is the desire to matter to others, often in a very particular way). Attending to the presence of these desires helps us make sense of the aversive quality of loneliness. The frustration of such desires is, after all, painful (Macdonald and Leary 2005: 202). Importantly, this holds even in cases where we remain unaware of those desires. Notice also that how painful the frustration of a desire feels tends to track the intensity of the desire. This suggests that individuals with especially strong desires for acknowledgment or connection will tend both to be more disposed to loneliness and to experience more intensely aversive forms of loneliness, in the event that they do not feel recognized or connected in the ways described above.

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Finally, it is worth attending to the fact that the conditions required to alleviate loneliness—even feelings of loneliness with extremely similar causal bases—can vary widely, differing from person to person. For one person, cultivating a wide circle of not-especially-close friends, each of whom appreciates a different side of her, may alleviate loneliness resulting from unmet recognitive needs. For another, however, this might not be enough: she might persist in her loneliness unless she can cultivate deep, intimate friendships in which she feels more fully seen and appreciated in her complexity, in the fullness of her being. While understanding the origins of loneliness can help us envision strategies for its alleviation, then, the complexities of human need are such that strategies cannot easily be generalized.

## 2. The Deliverances of Loneliness

As explored here, loneliness is a form of social pain resulting from the frustration of desires for various forms of social engagement (Macdonald and Leary 2005). Yet people often have very different responses to this painful feeling. To make sense of these differences, we must first understand the *deliverances* of loneliness: the features of an individual's situation that his lonely feeling conveys or makes salient to him. In brief, loneliness tends to attune the individual to his fundamental dependence on (and vulnerability to) others; it viscerally and painfully conveys his reliance on others for his well-being, sense of worth, and/or sense of self. Below, I focus on key deliverances of loneliness, features that are especially important for helping us see why people in different social positions, who are socialized differently, often respond differently to their loneliness. Ultimately, understanding these deliverances will allow us to make sense of how loneliness can catalyze vicious attitudes and feelings.

Notice first that loneliness makes salient an individual's powerlessness to meet certain of his needs on his own, producing or heightening feelings of powerlessness. Since opportunities for social connection as well as basic and particular recognition are goods bestowed upon one by another, whether one secures such goods is ultimately beyond one's control. One can ask for, demand, or even attempt to coerce recognition and various forms of social connection. One can attempt to matter to another person in the way they'd like to matter. But no strategy is foolproof; others can always fail to cooperate in the way required to genuinely meet one's needs. Loneliness thus reveals to the individual a basic and insurmountable limit on her agency.

The insurmountable nature of this limit is especially apparent in cases where the recognition or connection one desires implicitly involves a wish for that recognition or connection to be granted freely by the other.[5] When, in the absence of love, we wish for someone to love us, this wish typically includes both a desire for this love to be granted freely by the other and a desire for the other's love to constitute a spontaneous response to features of me that they recognize and value. In this familiar case, securing the recognition or connection I desire *requires* that I not be in control.

[5] Thanks to Bernard Reginster for highlighting this feature.

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In addition to highlighting my fundamental dependence on others and my powerlessness in the face of certain of my needs—i.e., my inability to endlessly "bend the world to [my] will" (Reginster 2021: 82)—loneliness tends to make one's vulnerability to others conspicuous. First, and most obviously, experiences of loneliness highlight the fact that failing to relate and connect in a variety of ways to others—including (and perhaps especially) in loving relationships—can be a source of great pain and suffering. In short, such experiences make it clear that one's hedonic well-being is often contingent on the ability and willingness of those in our lives to meet our needs (including recognition needs).

Additionally, without the goods of recognition and connection bestowed by (and developed in relationship with) others—goods typically acquired in loving relationship with others, including but not limited to the affirmation of the individual's worth as a person and others' knowing, positive evaluation of him *qua* the particular empirical individual he is—the lonely individual may experience a sense of ontological uprootedness: a feeling of deep insecurity that involves a feeling of not being at home in the world in which he finds himself.[6] Otherwise put, loneliness makes salient to the individual in its throes a kind of existential vulnerability, his susceptibility to a profound form of alienation from his world that threatens to arise when his basic social needs for recognition and connection are not met.

The point here is not simply that the lonely individual feels alienated from others, though surely he does. Rather, it is that as a result of various failures of connection and recognition, the lonely individual will tend to feel alienated and unmoored from *his world*: he will tend to feel *generally* disoriented, unable to get a toehold. Loneliness thus tends to disclose to us that we depend on others' recognition, affirmation, and cooperation in meeting our needs to feel oriented *at all* as the kind of beings that we are. It makes salient to us that, as social beings, we are always susceptible to feeling not-at-home in our world if others do not cooperate in the ways required for us to orient ourselves.

Let me say more. Human beings are social creatures; we belong to a world of others to whom we cannot help but reach out for recognition and connection, on whom we depend not only for a sense of rootedness—to feel at home in the world—but also for a sense of basic orientation. In other words, *qua* beings with distinctly social needs, we fundamentally lack self-sufficiency. While we can, and do, participate in relationships that ground us and provide a sense of security, the threat of ontological insecurity is always present. It is always possible for us to become alienated and unmoored from our world and ourselves as a result of others' failing to be in certain forms of relationship with us. Loneliness makes the possibility of ontological uprootedness—as well as the conditions required to mitigate it, which we cannot secure on our own—salient to the individual in its throes. By making clear to us that avoiding a sense of ontological uprootedness requires the cooperation of others and/or our occupation of a role of significance in others' lives, loneliness often functions to convey the fact of our fundamental vulnerability.

Importantly, while the lonely individual for whom the above deliverances of loneliness become salient may be consciously aware of them, he need not be. An

[6] "Ontological uprootedness" here is contrasted with Simon May's notion of "ontological rootedness" (2019): one's sense that one is at home in the world (bestowed upon one by another in loving relationship).

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individual's sense of his powerlessness and/or vulnerability can remain tacit while still playing a formative role in his affective and conative life (e.g., by provoking various emotions). Notice also that what loneliness conveys *here*—i.e., our powerlessness in the face of certain of our needs, dependence on others to meet those needs, and vulnerability to others (a result of others' inability or unwillingness to meet our needs)—are not false construals of the individual's situation or circumstance. Instead, they are inescapable and sometimes hard facts of the human situation, based in our nature as distinctly social animals. The social exigencies of the human condition make it such that we never find ourselves wholly in control of our well-being, happiness, or self-realization. There are genuine and insurmountable limits on our agency, limits to what we can realize on our own.

Importantly, this is *not* to say that our experiences of loneliness always "get things right." It's possible for an individual's loneliness to be unfitting, as it will be when certain goods the individual requires and perceives himself as lacking—e.g., basic and particular recognition—have in fact been granted to him. Instead, the claim here is simply that, when loneliness makes our powerlessness, dependence, and vulnerability salient—as it tends to do—what it makes salient are fundamental (and ultimately unavoidable) features of human life.

Finally, when loneliness is the result of a failure of particular recognition—and when one *recognizes it as such*—it can suggest to the individual in its throes the precarity of his identity, disrupting his self-conception. In cases like these, the lonely individual may become acutely aware of the need for others to reinforce his self-conception in order for him to (believably) maintain it. Specifically, without the goods bestowed by particular recognition—goods typically acquired in loving relationship with others, including the mirroring of one's self-conception in the recognition of the friend and the affirmation of core features of that self-conception, which function as reasons for the friend's positive evaluation—his identity may become threatened, his self-conception more tenuous. Given the orienting function that self-conceptions play —given that they both provide us with an orienting self-understanding and facilitate our selection and prioritization of goals (i.e., our goals take on significance for us in the light of our self-conceptions)—the weakening of one's self-conception can be both psychologically destabilizing and practically disruptive.

Notice that here, as before, what loneliness conveys to the individual in its throes is the reality of his situation: the potential for his self-conception to be disrupted in the absence of others' recognition and affirmation of it. The strength and stability of our self-conceptions will often be tied to whether others take them up, and rightly so. Indeed, even those of us who maintain firm self-conceptions are liable to have —and, *qua* rational beings, should have—our self-conceptions shaken in the absence of others' endorsements of them.

## 3. Ressentiment as a Vicious Response to the Deliverances of Loneliness

That everyone experiences loneliness at some time or another makes good sense. After all, this feeling has its origin in human needs, and a life in which the relevant needs are met in perpetuity is extremely unlikely (if it's possible at all). Even so, how

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individuals experience and respond to loneliness varies. In what follows, I argue that this can be explained at least in part by the fact that how we experience and respond to the reality of our needs is importantly shaped by features *other* than those needs, including and perhaps especially our expectations and values. Since our expectations and values are typically (and often, pre-reflectively) shaped by the facts of our concrete situation—including social and cultural facts such as (internalized) norms, social status, and socialization—how we tend to experience and respond to the fact of our needs will also often be shaped by these facts.

I take it to be generally true that how individuals respond to the fact of their loneliness will very often be shaped by their values and expectations (especially expectations related to their needs). But focusing on a specific case can bring this dynamic into clear view. What's more, the case I have in mind—how loneliness, together with an individual's socially and culturally shaped expectations, may catalyze the extremist attitude of ressentiment—allows us to recognize the importance of understanding these emotional dynamics, especially in the case of vicious attitudes.

## 3.1. Ressentiment

While there are many ways of framing ressentiment in the literature (Nietzsche 2006; Scheler 1961; Huddleston 2021; Salmela and Capelos 2021; Katsafanas 2022), here I treat ressentiment as a complex psychic state that originates in unpleasant experiences of powerlessness—experiences that lead the individual to develop a disagreeable sense of her ineffectiveness as an agent that impacts her self-esteem—and involves an indignant, maliciously hateful emotional response to one's apparent impotence. This hateful emotional response develops when the individual comes to interpret her impotence as the result of her having been "slighted, injured, or wronged by… some person or group" (Katsafanas 2022: 172, paraphrasing Scheler 1961). It is this person or group of people that becomes the target of the individual's ressentiment. Below, I develop each of these dimensions of ressentiment in turn.

Ressentiment begins in experiences of powerlessness (i.e., experiences in which agents feel powerless to accomplish some end). In order for ressentiment to develop from such experiences, however, other conditions must also be met. First, experiences of powerlessness must be experienced as disagreeable—i.e., the agent must feel displeasure in the face of her powerlessness to accomplish some end—to conduce to ressentiment. A hiker who backpacks into the New Mexican wilderness without a cellphone or laptop may be powerless to check her email as a result, and this powerlessness may register in her awareness. But her experience of powerlessness need not be disagreeable. Indeed, she may find her powerlessness in this situation delightful, even wonderfully freeing. In cases like these, an experience of powerlessness does not conduce to ressentiment.

It is not enough for the development of ressentiment, however, that an agent who feels powerless to accomplish some end finds the fact of her powerlessness disagreeable. Importantly, the individual must also interpret her experience of powerlessness as evidence of *her own* powerlessness: she must develop a sense

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(whether explicit or tacit) of her own *impotence*. And she must experience her impotence as disagreeable. For the individual to develop a sense of her impotence just is for her to apprehend some incapacity or agential limitation of hers: it involves a sense of her ineffectiveness as an agent, whether with respect to a particular pursuit or more generally.[7]

Let's return to the case of the hiker. Although the hiker may feel powerless, she need not take these feelings to indicate anything about her agency or agential efficacy. What's more, even if she *does* take these feelings to indicate something about her agency, they need not be experienced as disagreeable. For example, she might see those feelings as resulting from a mismatch between a trivial feature of herself presently outside of her control (i.e., a habit for email-checking) and an objective feature of the situation in which she finds herself (i.e., in the forest, without cellular data, Wi-Fi, or an email-checking device). For ressentiment to develop, the individual must develop a disagreeable sense of her own impotence as a result of her experience of powerlessness.

Finally, in cases of ressentiment, the individual not only experiences her impotence as disagreeable, but experiences a negative impact to her self-esteem or self-conception as a result of believing herself impotent. Notice that for this negative impact to occur, the individual's sense of self-worth and/or self-conception must be bound up with her sense of her effectiveness as an agent, whether with respect to a particular pursuit or more generally. (Importantly, the individual need not be aware of this connection.)

In some cases, the connection between an individual's sense of impotence and her self-esteem will be quite direct. Perhaps an individual overtly ties her potency or strength to her worth, such that she will understand any manifestation of impotence as compromising that worth. In many cases, however, this connection will be routed through the individual's practical identities and/or features of her self-conception. In these cases, it is only when an individual believes herself powerless to achieve an aim *that she cares about* (i.e., one to which she is attached) that her sense of incapacity may impact her self-esteem. Of course, for this individual to experience her impotence as a knock to her self-esteem, her ability to achieve that aim must be tied to her sense of self-worth. While this is an unfortunate phenomenon—ideally, one's sense of self-worth is firm and unshakeable, dissociated from one's accomplishment of various aims—it is, I think, familiar enough. Imagine, for example, a woman whose role as a parent is central to her self-conception, someone for whom *parent* is a practical identity, a "description under which [she] value[s herself]" (Korsgaard 1996: 101). Imagine, furthermore, that she has come to see her worth as tied to her ability to parent well (perhaps as a result of her socialization). If such a person comes to believe that she is an ineffective parent, her self-esteem will tend to suffer.

While the origin of ressentiment lies in the individual's development of a disagreeable sense of impotence—one that compromises his sense of self-worth—ressentiment proper only emerges when the individual attributes his impotence to another person or group of people, seeing it as the result of some slight or wrong

[7] Apprehension here need not involve the agent's veridical perception of a feature she possesses. And the agent need not be aware of the sense of impotence she harbors as such for her self-esteem to suffer.

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(Katsafanas 2022: 172, paraphrasing Scheler 1961). This interpretation first gives rise to feelings of indignation: feelings of anger in the face of perceived ill treatment.[8] In cases of ressentiment, however, this indignation takes a vicious form, one fraught with a personalized sense of grievance: it takes the form of "spiteful hatred" (Hampton 1988: 62), a form of hatred felt towards someone who the agent believes has "personally brought harm to one" (Hampton 1988: 61). The agent who experiences spiteful hatred (1) feels indignation in the face of some ill treatment to which he believes himself to be subject; (2) understands this (alleged) ill treatment as a harm perpetrated by another; (3) experiences "personal animosity" (Hampton 1988: 61) toward the object of his hatred; and (4) is motivated to seek revenge for the alleged harm or injury he has suffered (i.e., he is disposed to act vengefully, to cause harm to the person or persons allegedly responsible for that harm or injury). Additionally, for the individual experiencing ressentiment, revenge importantly aims not only at making the target of one's hatred suffer but also (5) at "restoring self-esteem" through hurting or diminishing the hated object (Hampton 1988: 62). This uniquely motivated form of revenge results from the way in which the individual's felt impotence (allegedly the result of some harm or slight perpetrated by another) is bound up with his self-esteem.[9]

So, along with an initial knock to an individual's sense of his effectiveness as an agent, ressentiment requires a particular interpretation on the individual's behalf to develop. Experiencing feelings of powerlessness that he apprehends as proof of his agential inefficacy and which thereby compromise his self-esteem, the individual *then* interprets his apparent impotence as resulting from some slight or wrong. This gives rise to indignation (Katsafanas 2022: 172). In cases of ressentiment, however, this interpretation gives rise *not only* to garden variety indignation, but spiteful hatred, a form of malicious anger that involves a sense of personal animosity and gives rise to a vengeful impulse (Hampton 1988: 62). As in more typical cases of revenge, the vengeful actions at which the individual experiencing ressentiment aims constitute attempts to harm or punish whoever he sees as responsible for his apparent impotence. In cases of ressentiment, however, these vengeful actions *also* constitute attempts to assert his worth, to bolster his self-esteem.

Of course, attempting to rectify the initial blow to one's self-esteem through an act of revenge is a deeply misguided strategy. While the person who acts from ressentiment may achieve the outcome at which his spiteful hatred aims, his vengeful actions fail to touch the underlying cause of ressentiment: his sense of impotence and its link to his sense of self-worth.

## 3.2. From loneliness to ressentiment

Now that we have the phenomenon of ressentiment in view, we can see how loneliness might catalyze ressentiment. To begin, let me explain how loneliness

[8] Of course, an agent can experience (inapt) indignation in the absence of genuine mistreatment or injustice.

[9] My claim is *not* that all lonely individuals who develop a sense of impotence will experience an impulse to remedy the feelings of powerlessness they experience (and especially not that they will pursue revenge as a means of doing so).

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might provoke emotional responses of indignant anger in certain individuals rather than the more typical responses of sadness or anguish. First, recall that an individual who is lonely—who experiences psychic suffering as the result of a perceived failure to have certain social needs met—finds himself in a position of powerlessness with respect to those needs; he is dependent on others to meet them. This situation tends to produce not only feelings of powerlessness, but also a sense of impotence: insofar as experiences of loneliness focus us on our inability to meet certain of our needs (as well as our dependence on others), such experiences throw the limits of our agency into stark relief. Notice again here that an individual's sense of impotence need not be explicit, something of which he is aware. Indeed, even if this sense remains tacit (e.g., the individual is in denial or his sense of impotence under repression), loneliness can still have the impacts described below.

In addition to his powerlessness and dependence, loneliness also typically attunes the lonely individual to his fundamental vulnerability: he cannot escape the fact that his hedonic well-being, his basic orientation in the world, and the stability of his self-conception are contingent on others, who may fail to (or may be unwilling to) see and engage him in various ways and/or to cooperate in the meeting of his needs. (By listing these factors separately, I do not mean to imply that they come apart in human experience. It seems clear that feelings of disorientation will negatively impact hedonic well-being; that disruptions to one's self-conception will result in disruptions to one's orientation in the world; and so on. I list them separately only to indicate distinct axes of vulnerability.) If this individual has also been socialized to disvalue his dependence and vulnerability—perhaps understanding these qualities as disgraceful weaknesses, which he opposes to valued qualities such as potency, independence, invulnerability, and self-sufficiency—he will be more likely to experience intensely aversive feelings of shame as a result of loneliness and its deliverances. In other words, the lonely individual who has internalized socially inculcated narratives devaluing dependence and vulnerability will be more likely to suffer negative impacts to his self-esteem as a result of his lonely condition.

If, furthermore, this individual has been socialized to expect others to meet the social needs that he perceives to be unmet—if he feels *entitled* to the goods of which he thinks himself deprived and believes that others are *obligated* to provide these goods to him—he will be more likely than others without such expectations to interpret his loneliness as an injury, to understand it as indicative of mistreatment by another. Importantly, given his belief that certain others are obligated to provide him with the goods that he perceives himself as lacking, his sense of injury will tend to involve a feeling of personal animosity. This makes such an individual more likely not only to experience other-directed anger *qua* indignation as a result of his loneliness, but to experience spiteful hatred. Otherwise put, rather than interpreting his loneliness as an unfortunate, sometimes unavoidable fact of life, such an individual will tend to interpret it as a personal affront. And he may see hatred as a fitting response to this affront.

The lonely individual I describe so far is one who (1) develops a sense of his own impotence, dependence, and vulnerability as a result of a failure, whether real or perceived, to meet certain of his social needs. As a result of his socialization, however, he has also come (2) to disvalue these qualities and (3) to expect to be able to avoid

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experiences in which he is (or feels) disempowered, dependent, or vulnerable. (Again, the sense of impotence, dependence, and vulnerability developed by the lonely individual may be tacit.[10] In fact, the more invested an individual is in his potency and self-sufficiency, the more likely this sense is to be tacit, a result of the individual's shielding himself from beliefs that are undesirable from his perspective to hold.) In addition, as a result of his socialization, this lonely individual not only (4) feels entitled to the social goods of which he is deprived but also (5) believes that certain others are obligated to provide these goods to him. As a result of (1), (2), and (3), he experiences feelings of shame and self-loathing: his loneliness negatively impacts his self-esteem. As a result of (4) and (5), which facilitate his interpretation of loneliness as evidence of mistreatment or injury, he experiences a malicious form of indignation: spiteful hatred, targeted at those he believes are obligated to provide him with the social goods he believes he lacks.

Above, we have all of the ingredients of ressentiment apart from its unique vengeful impulse, which aims both to punish or cause harm to whoever one sees as responsible for one's alleged injury and to bolster one's sense of self-worth. By recalling that spiteful hatred is a species of anger, however, we can easily see how this impulse might arise. Although Amia Srinivasan (2018: 129) and others (Silva 2024) convincingly argue that there are cases in which anger aims *merely* at recognition—and although anger experienced by a lonely individual whose recognitive needs are not met will be especially likely to direct him toward actions aimed *in part* at securing recognition—anger also frequently aims at retaliation (Haidt 2003; Deonna and Teroni 2012; Nussbaum 2016). That is, anger often motivates the individual in its throes to cause suffering to whoever is (purportedly) responsible for the (real or apparent) mistreatment to which their anger responds. It is only when the hatred experienced by our lonely individual above generates a vengeful impulse aimed both at harming the target of his hatred and restoring self-esteem that we have a case of ressentiment proper.

Notice that the more an individual fixates on the alleged injury he has suffered, the more intense his feelings will tend to become. How might this fixation take hold in the case of our lonely individual above, who has been socialized into certain entitlements and expectations? First, if this individual compares his situation to those of others with a similar social status who have been able to secure the goods he lacks, he will tend to perceive his loneliness as indicative not just of mistreatment but of *unfair* treatment. The more he compares his circumstance to others' circumstances, the more likely he is to become preoccupied with the (alleged) unfairness of it all. This can lead to the intensification of his indignant anger, as well as the intensification of his feelings of shameful impotence. Additionally, in cases where the individual's loneliness is intense, long-lasting, or chronic, he will be more likely to become fixated on both his impotence and his aggrieved interpretation of his loneliness. This, in turn, will tend to intensify the emotions and impulses characteristic of ressentiment.

[10] It might suffice for the individual to develop a sense that his potency and self-sufficiency are *under threat* (which would require him to take beliefs in his impotence, dependence, and vulnerability seriously as candidate beliefs).

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Before moving on to the concrete case of incels' loneliness, let me flag a few things. First, since one's membership in a historically dominant social group makes it more likely that one will be socialized to disvalue dependence and vulnerability; expect to avoid feelings of dependence and vulnerability; and expect others to meet one's social needs, membership in such a group will make one more likely to develop angry, indignant responses to loneliness—and thus more likely to develop ressentiment. Second, notice that there is an interesting psychic tension in cases where someone both disvalues their dependence and expects their needs to be met by others. After all, such an expectation seems to involve an implicit recognition of one's dependence. How can anyone, we might think, inhabit both attitudes without recognizing their inconsistency? But, of course, we find these attitudes co-occurring in people all the time (e.g., in heterosexual men who enforce rigid and conventional gendered family roles).

Finally—and extremely importantly—notice that certain of the beliefs harbored by the lonely individual above are ill-founded, and certain of his emotions unfitting. First, dependence and vulnerability are not essentially disvaluable. While humanly understandable, shame and self-loathing are unfitting responses to these features. Second, while everyone can reasonably expect to receive basic recognition from others, no one is *entitled* to more than that (e.g., particular recognition or the other forms of connection described above) outside of the context of particular mutually established relationships. And apart from basic recognition, the social goods the lonely individual perceives himself as lacking are goods that no one is *obligated* independently of such relationships to provide. (Indeed, even in the context of particular mutually established relationships, the scope of our entitlements and obligations can be difficult to parse.) What's more, loneliness is never *by itself* evidence of mistreatment or injustice. We may become lonely without being mistreated or treated unfairly. But in cases where there is no genuine entitlement, no genuine obligation, and no evidence of mistreatment or unfairness, the emotions of indignant anger and spiteful hatred are clearly unfitting. Otherwise put, while the features of human life made salient by loneliness together with the constellation of beliefs and expectations described above may generate anger and hatred, these emotions will be unfitting in all but a handful of cases (e.g., in cases of alienation as a result of social oppression or mistreatment in intimate relationships).

Now, this may seem obvious. But given the appeals made by extremists (e.g., incels or "involuntary celibates") to their experiences of loneliness as *warranting* their vicious attitudes, it is important to point out. Loneliness does not *warrant* ressentiment. And it certainly does not excuse the violent impulses and actions that arise as a result.

## 3.3. Loneliness and extremism: ressentiment in lonely incels

Let's attend now to a specific case. Below, I explore how loneliness manifests in the lives of incels, an extremist group whose members frequently appeal to their loneliness (Tietjen and Tirkkonen 2023: 1229) to explain their extremist attitudes and violent behavior, including the horrific 2014 killing of two women and three men by self-declared incel Elliot Rodger (Withnall 2014). As cis-heterosexual men

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within a cis-heterosexual patriarchy, incels typically belong to multiple socially dominant groups.[11] (I define "cis-hetero patriarchy" as a sociocultural milieu characterized by the historical domination of cisgender, heterosexual men and subordination of women via the unequal distribution of power.) In addition, they have internalized and come to endorse widespread and deeply sexist narratives endemic to their patriarchal milieu.[12] There are two features of these narratives to which I wish to pay attention here. First, sexist, patriarchal narratives feature a rigid ideal of masculinity according to which men are (and should be) strong, virile, powerful, self-sufficient, independent, and invulnerable. Socialization into this ideal leads incels (and not *just* incels) to value these qualities, to aspire to manifest them, and to expect *qua* heterosexual men both to manifest them and to have experiences that reinforce them. Additionally, socialization into this ideal of masculinity leads incels to disvalue powerlessness, dependence, and vulnerability —to see these qualities as disgraceful or shameful weaknesses when manifest by a man—and creates an expectation that they will be able to avoid experiences in which they *are* or *feel* disempowered, dependent, or vulnerable.

Second, as Kate Manne emphasizes, heterosexist narratives involving views about what men are owed (goods like attention, recognition, sex, and so on) and who owes it to them (women) also tend to inculcate a sense of entitlement in heterosexual men (2017). This "illicit sense of entitlement vis-à-vis women" (2017: 107) involves men's expectation that women will meet various of their needs (e.g., that women will meet their recognition needs by bestowing the goods of acknowledgment and love upon them) as well as the belief that women *should* meet those needs. Incels thus hold women to "false or spurious obligations" (ibid.). So, when certain of the incel's needs are not met by the group of people he (incorrectly) believes are obligated to meet those needs–e.g., when he perceives himself as unable to secure recognition, love, or sex from women—he (wrongly) experiences this not as mere misfortune, but as mistreatment, an injury and personal affront resulting from women's failure to fulfill their duties to him.

How might these features of misogynistic narratives interact with loneliness and its deliverances to generate ressentiment in the incel? First, recall both that the lonely individual is powerless to meet certain of his needs—he is impotent with respect to them—and that experiences of loneliness tend to make an individual's powerlessness, dependence, and vulnerability salient to him. We see the latter, for example, in incel Elliot Rodger's infamous manifesto, where he expresses a strong desire for recognition—he "wants to feel worthy" (2014: 135)—and reports feeling that he is not recognized or acknowledged.[13] In short, Rodger perceives his recognition needs as going unmet. What's more, his persistent feeling of loneliness keeps these unmet needs top of mind. This feeling fixates him on both his perception that his need for recognition is unmet and the fact that he is powerless in the face of

[11] Note that incels wrongfully claim marginalization (Goetze and Crerar 2022).

[12] See Tietjen and Tirkkonen 2023.

[13] Manne (2017) and Huddleston (2021) use Rodger's case to illuminate the phenomena they describe (misogyny and ressentiment, respectively). Similarly, my aim is for Rodger's case to illustrate how loneliness might catalyze ressentiment (and not to generalize from his case).

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that need: he cannot meet it on his own. Not only is Rodger *in fact* powerless, dependent, and vulnerable in certain respects; he is also reminded of these facts by his painful feeling of loneliness.[14]

A close reading of Rodger's manifesto—which I do not recommend—bears this out. There, Rodger expresses feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability that he finds extremely troubling. First, he complains about his apparent impotence (2014: 28, 54, 57) and frequently laments what he describes as his weakness (2014: 44-47, 63-4, 69, 75, 116, 124), noting that his feelings of weakness make him feel "worthless" (2014: 47). He also disvalues perceived weakness in other heterosexual men (2014: 62, 72, 91). This disvaluation of weakness and vulnerability—along with an expectation of potency (2014: 57, 79, 106, 108)—explains why Rodger reports being not just upset, but "traumatized" when a pretty girl insults and pushes him at summer camp. This event, he reports, "made [him] feel like an insignificant, unworthy little mouse… so small and vulnerable… [and] traumatized [him] to no end" (2014: 32).

Since lonely incels both internalize and endorse cis-hetero patriarchal narratives —according to which powerlessness, dependence, and vulnerability are to be disvalued in heterosexual men—both the revelation and the reminder that they manifest such features, inherent to experiences of loneliness, lead to intense negative self-regarding attitudes like shame and self-loathing. The incel's loneliness suggests to him that he has failed to live up to the wished-for status of strong, self-sufficient "alpha male" (Rodger 2014: 28). The incel's sense of impotence is experienced as a knock to his self-esteem.

In addition to disclosing his failure to live up to a (pernicious) ideal of self-sufficient masculinity, the incel's loneliness is (wrongly) interpreted as evidence of mistreatment at the hands of women, leading to (unwarranted) indignant anger directed at womankind. An emotional response to his sense of impotence (which, again, he experiences as a knock to his self-esteem and interprets as a result of mistreatment at the hands of women), the incel's indignant anger is exacerbated by his loneliness, which makes his impotence and vulnerability especially pronounced. But it is his sense of *entitlement*—his false belief that women owe him various social goods, the lack of which his loneliness makes salient—that catalyzes his spiteful hatred, as well as a desire for revenge that motivates him to cause women harm as a way of demonstrating power and attempting to bolster his self-worth.

Rodger's sense of entitlement to the goods of attention, recognition, and sex, as well as his belief that failing to secure such goods constitutes an injury inflicted on him by womankind, is evident throughout his manifesto. He thinks it is women who have "denied [him] a happy life;" it is women for whom his "entire being burns with hatred" (2014: 135). Since the incel understands himself as suffering an injury at the hands of women and women as able yet unwilling to remedy this injury, his situation is experienced not only as shameful, but as an occasion for spiteful hatred. In short, Rodger's lonely condition not only provokes (unwarranted) ressentiment *qua*

[14] While Rodger is explicitly aware of his impotence, dependence, and vulnerability, loneliness may catalyze ressentiment even in the absence of such awareness.

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spiteful hatred but appears to him as a *worthy* occasion for such hatred, given his distorted interpretation of the situation.

Furthermore, as a result of comparing his lot in life with that of other heterosexual men—which he does *extremely often*—Rodger comes to believe that he is the subject not only of ill treatment but *unfair* treatment. Although "as children we all play together as equals in a fair environment," he claims, after puberty "[l]ife… become [s] a bitter and unfair struggle for self-worth, all because girls will choose some boys over others" (2014: 25). Otherwise put, in addition to reminding him of his impotence, his allegedly compromised masculinity, and the alleged injury he suffers at the hands of women, the incel's chronic loneliness functions to persistently remind him of the apparent unfairness of a world in which other men are able to secure the goods he lacks. This fixation intensifies his hatred. This intensifying effect shows up in the "extreme rage" Rodger experiences when he sees (or even "think[s] about") happy couples (2014: 65, 66).

Along with the intensification of hatred comes the intensification of the vengeful impulse that the incel's hatred generates. And it is this impulse that drives his attempts to restore his self-esteem and potency by "punishing" the alleged source of his feelings of powerlessness (and the object of his ressentiment): women. We see this in Rodger's vision for the violent attack he plans and carries out: he sees this attack not only as a way to punish those who have allegedly injured him (118, 131), but as a way to "show… [his] true worth" (2014: 137).

## Conclusion

As social creatures, human beings are susceptible to loneliness. Even so, as argued above, differences in individuals' social situations may result in different responses to the facts of human existence that loneliness makes salient. Understanding these differences in response not only allows us to achieve deeper insight into the emotional lives of those experiencing loneliness—something valuable in itself—but also allows us to recognize how, in certain cases, loneliness may catalyze the development of vicious extremist attitudes. Specifically, coming to see the role that various sociocultural factors (e.g., social status and socialization) play in shaping an individual's expectations and values helps explain why certain individuals will be more likely to develop an extremist attitude of ressentiment as a result of their loneliness. Notice, however, that this explanation does not *warrant* or excuse an individual's development of such attitudes. An individual's dominant social status might dispose him to develop ressentiment more readily in response to his loneliness, but this disposition can be resisted—and *should* be, not least due to the unfittingness of this vicious emotion. So, *pace* claims promulgated by lonely extremists, loneliness neither legitimates nor warrants the vicious attitudes and impulses they develop.

Recall once more that the features of life to which lonely extremists react—their dependence on and vulnerability to others—are unavoidable features of human life more generally, sometimes hard facts with which we all must contend. We cannot completely and definitively avoid our powerlessness in the face of certain of our needs; we will always be dependent on others to some extent. Nor can we ever entirely rid ourselves of our vulnerability to others, as plenty of distinctly human

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experiences, like falling in love, make clear. We are fundamentally needy and vulnerable beings, beings subject to (sometimes painful) transformation by the world we inhabit. The world in which we find ourselves—a world that includes others' desires and whims—is one over which we may never exert total control. Ultimately, coping non-viciously with loneliness will require us to affirm—or, at least, not to deny or evade—these features of the human condition. For individuals who have been socialized to disvalue their dependence and vulnerability, learning to do so will likely require careful reflective work, including the identification and excavation of various internalized norms and apparent entitlements. While this work may be onerous, it is the work necessary to live well: not only to disrupt one's development of vicious attitudes, but also to facilitate an attitude of self-affirmation, which requires honestly facing up to the kind of being one is.[15]

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