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Ben Lazare Mijuskovic, "Metaphysical Dualism, Subjective Idealism, and Existential Loneliness: Matter and Mind"

Brad DeFord

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Ben Lazare Mijuskovic. *Metaphysical Dualism, Subjective Idealism, and Existential Loneliness: Matter and Mind.* Routledge 2022. 328 pp. \$155.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780367741167); \$39.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780367741273).

From the outset, Ben Lazare Mijuskovic is clear about his purpose: ‘The goal of the present study is to survey the kaleidoscopic history of Western theories of consciousness and conclude on the inevitability of existential loneliness’ (1). What results is a gathering of shards from a wide variety of Western philosophers over time. These Mijuskovic places in his kaleidoscope, through which he views his interest in loneliness. This does not make his survey uninteresting, as fragmented as it might have been. In fact, because of the singularity of his purpose, he finds a commonality as well as comparison across time and place that results in a fairly unified account. As the kaleidoscope is turned, a wide variety of light is shed on loneliness from the philosophers and writers Mijuskovic has chosen. This renders an account that is not as reductive as it might have been had the sources on which Mijuskovic draws been more singular.

The breadth of the author’s scope can be appreciated by a survey of the first 12 chapters of his book. On the one hand, Mijuskovic finds a touchstone in Kant, with whom he begins in chapter 1 and to whom he periodically returns, e.g., in chapter 12 in his examination of Brentano. This is one way in which Mijuskovic articulates a unifying conceptual thread across a wide survey of metaphysical dualism vs. subjective idealism.

On the other hand, he notes that some of the chapters have been previously published: Chapter 6 on Descartes in 1971 (*Studi Internazionali Di Filosofia*); Chapter 9 on Hume in 1977 (*Journal of the History of Philosophy*); and Chapter 1, ‘The Achilles of Rationalist Arguments,’ takes its title from a volume published in 1974 in which Mijuskovic has a chapter (Martinus Nijhoff). This observation is not meant to be a critique, rather to suggest that the book takes on the format of a summary of Mijuskovic’s life work. As such, for example, he takes the occasion of defending his point of view in one footnote (20) and contending with Paul Ricoeur’s understanding of Husserl in another (234). Mijuskovic is engaged in these philosophical conversations—on many fronts. His style implies a personal stake.

What it all leads to, as roads to Rome, is Mijuskovic’s focus on ‘the fear of loneliness and the concomitant desire to secure intimacy’ (254). He says, ‘what I am seeking is a universal principle animating all mankind. I am concerned to portray human loneliness ... as our primary existential condition’ (255). This previously published position has become chapter 13 in the book published in 1977. It appears to have served as the lodestar of his thinking ever since.

When he says he is taking an ‘interdisciplinary approach,’ he means that the scope of this chapter exceeds both philosophy and psychology to include religion, sociology, and literature. His endeavor, Mijuskovic says, was ‘strongly influenced by Frieda Fromm-Reichmann’s groundbreaking posthumously published paper, ‘Loneliness’ in 1959. Mijuskovic was impressed that Fromm-Reichmann took both an ‘interdisciplinary approach’ and had an ‘interpersonal emphasis’ (253). He follows in Fromm-Reichmann’s framework.

Mijuskovic pursues his substantiation of loneliness in the human condition first gleaning from ‘the dynamics of narcissism’ in chapter 14. He begins with reference to ‘infantile loneliness’ (288) followed by a critique of Fichte: ‘his extreme metaphysical and dynamic volunteerism deludes the self into an illusionary aura of self-sufficiency, power, and narcissism only later to be betrayed into arms of loneliness’ (289). Mijuskovic views Hegel similarly, and concludes: ‘The origin of loneliness arises from the intrinsic paradox of human existence’ (297).



Chapter 15 on ‘the limits of self-knowledge’ reviews evidence in the literature of ‘the essential connection between the fear of isolation and the consequent desire for intimacy’ (303). In chapter 16 Mijuskovic concludes with a brief discussion of ‘the dynamics of intimacy and empathy.’ To demonstrate that ‘loneliness can be incredibly intense, ‘he provides ‘six possible *dynamic* modes of human separation’ (317). Although he concludes that intimacy provides an ‘*affective* rather than cognitive’ solution to the problem of separation and the resulting loneliness, Mijuskovic credits Kant’s ‘second formulation of the categorical imperative [as] a good guide for achieving intimacy. ‘Always treat the other self as if they had infinite worth and dignity and never as a means for your own selfish or utilitarian ends’ (321). This does not mean that, for Mijuskovic, Kant resolves the ‘intrinsic paradox of human existence.’ For him, loneliness ‘is synonymous with human existence’ (253).

Several factors arise that suggest Mijuskovic is writing less from analysis or discovery than from a foregone conclusion. For instance, the earlier date of publication of his keystone chapter 11 probably fit well into a time when, as he summarizes, ‘years ago there was a theoretical movement promoting philosophical counseling,’ and ‘loneliness was one of those themes’ (321). Presumably, Mijuskovic participated in those conversations. Likely, he has brought forward his thinking over the decades to this volume.

It takes nothing away from his thoroughness and scope to note a small work that might have contributed to discussions of the significance of loneliness back in that earlier time. Philip Slater’s *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American culture at the breaking point* (Beacon Press 1970), would have fit with Mijuskovic’s mention of David Reisman et al.’s *The Lonely Crowd* (Yale University Press 2001) and would have had more significance for *our* time because here in 2022, we have a more urgent sense of American culture at the breaking point (277).

This is merely to say that for all of Mijuskovic’s wide-reaching scholarship, there is something of a present-tense disconnect with the importance of his project. In an age of pandemic, it is not as if issues and experiences of loneliness have lost their intensity and importance. On the contrary: they are existentially more relevant over this time than before. The result is that Mijuskovic’s claim that ‘the fact is we are born alone; we breathe alone; and we die alone’ (280) is all the more *existential* now. (Moreover, Mijuskovic could have edited his prose to use less ‘man’ and more inclusive terminology).

This thought leads to two more. On the one hand, Mijuskovic appears to insist upon a perspective not unlike Miguel de Unamuno’s ‘tragic sense of life.’ For Mijuskovic, we desire intimacy for its mutuality and sense of belonging, but we are not successful at overcoming our sense of separation. Primarily, in his view, we are motivated by *fear*, specifically, as he puts it: ‘the fear of loneliness ... anchors all our anxieties’ (255). The possibilities of ‘intimacy and empathy’ receive less attention from Mijuskovic because of his logic of loneliness leads to the heart of the human condition.

On the other hand, Mijuskovic may not only be captivated by his focus on loneliness but also captive to the dualism of ‘intimacy or loneliness’ (288). Since the former is for him a failed human project, the latter becomes our Fate. This is to say, there is little *dialectic* in Mijuskovic’s way of thinking. This suggests that Mijuskovic might have benefited from taking a *contemplative* turn. For instance, Mijuskovic gives almost no consideration to *solitude* as a *choice* we could make in the face of the challenges of *alterity*. Psychologists and spiritual writers have written of solitude as an alternative that transcends the separations of self-from-self, self-from-other, and even self-from-Higher Power or what might be called a *deeper sense of life’s meaning*. But Mijuskovic does not entertain this alternative.

As a result, not only is Mijuskovic's perspective tragic, but his enterprise becomes its own tragedy. Something is missing. In a word, the despair of the inevitability of loneliness is not offered any transcendence by hope. There is an overriding sense of condemnation to what Mijuskovic sees through his kaleidoscope.

Moreover, the question presents itself: just how fundamental *is* the 'fear of loneliness' to the human condition—in contrast to, say, *death anxiety*, about which both philosophers and psychologists have written extensively? What if we are not 'born alone' but at least initially experience a level of self/other intimacy that is life-sustaining? What if in our 'breathing' we come to an appreciation of intimacy with self in an actualization of solitude that overcomes our fear of loneliness? And what if, in that process, we come into a relationship with the Wholly Other that sustains a solitude in our dying that is relieving of our death anxiety, so that essentially and existentially, we do not die 'alone'? When Mijuskovic quotes Paul Tillich (without attribution; 251), he takes from Tillich 'the anxiety of meaninglessness [as] anxiety about the loss of ultimate concern'—which suggests a form of anxiety that might link the fear of loneliness to death anxiety in a way that achieving a capacity for solitude would assuage. Comfort at birth, during life, and while dying is possible. Our fears and anxieties, of whatever sort, need not triumph.

Brad DeFord, Independent Scholar