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Political Philosophy and Loneliness

Loneliness has received little attention in philosophy compared to other academic disciplines, including within the subfield of political philosophy on which this article focuses. However, growing political concern – exemplified by initiatives like the UK's *End Loneliness* campaign and Japan's appointment of a Minister for Loneliness – along with the pioneering work of Kimberly Brownlee, has increased interest from political philosophers over the past decade. This review examines recent discussions at the intersection of political philosophy and loneliness, structured around three key themes: (i) the political challenges of loneliness, including its alleged links to extremism, misogyny, and social inequality; (ii) the extent of state responsibility in addressing loneliness; and (iii) the moral (un)desirability of various policy interventions aimed at mitigating loneliness, such as social policies, urban planning reforms, and digital solutions.

Keywords: Loneliness; Political Philosophy; Social Isolation; Lockdowns; Authoritarianism; Incels; Social Human Rights

1. Introduction

The issue of loneliness has been relatively neglected by political philosophers, i.e. philosophers who study questions pertaining to what a just and otherwise desirable society looks like and what roles states specifically should play to help realize it (Wolff 2022). This is true especially of those working in the analytical tradition that is dominant in much of the Anglophone world (Martinich and Sosa 2012). Nonetheless, as this literature review shows, the political philosophy literature on this topic is growing (e.g. Brownlee 2020; de Vries 2021; Tietjen and Tirkkonen 2023; Jecker et al. 2024), which may be due in no small part to increased political attention. For example, already prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK launched the 'End Loneliness' campaign (Coughlan 2017) and appointed a Minister for Loneliness (albeit within an existing ministerial role rather than as a standalone position), which was followed by Japan's creation in 2021 of a dedicated ministerial post specifically tasked with addressing loneliness and social isolation (Ryall 2021). Besides contributions by political philosophers, there has

also been a recent rise in the number of researchers from other disciplines, most notably social scientists, who have explored (potential) normative aspects and implications of loneliness from a political perspective (Sagan 2024; Jentoft, Sandset, and Haldar 2025; Magnet and Orr 2022; Jones 2022; Cvetkovich 2022; Jentoft, Sandset, and Haldar 2025; Jentoft 2023).

This article aims to survey recent work in political philosophy on loneliness. It provides a thematic overview—rather than a systematic or empirical review—of political philosophical literature on the topic published over the past four years. To identify relevant literature, we searched databases including Google Scholar, PhilPapers, and Web of Science using the keywords "political philosophy," "loneliness," and "social isolation." This initial search yielded 72 papers. After screening abstracts and reviewing the full texts, we selected 32 papers that directly addressed loneliness through a political philosophical lens. The three themes discussed below were derived inductively from these works, based on recurring conceptual and normative concerns. The three themes are: (i) political challenges associated with loneliness; (ii) debates over the state's responsibility for loneliness; and (iii) proposed policy responses. These themes reflect foundational questions in political philosophy, including the legitimacy of state action and the nature of social justice.

2. Common themes

2.1. Political challenges raised by loneliness

One strand of recent loneliness-related work in political philosophy focuses on political challenges that loneliness might pose, especially for liberal democracies. At least three different potential challenges have been discussed. Drawing on Arendt (1973), Wendling (2023) argues that contemporary social and political structures in the West contribute to loneliness and, in so do doing, make individuals more vulnerable to totalitarianism. This happens, the author believes, because these structures hinder people's ability to confirm shared truths and develop a stable sense of identity. Specifically, her contention is that factors such as socio-political discrimination, economic hardships, and the digital environment – where algorithms reinforce individual beliefs – make it harder for people to connect with others and find common ground. As a result, a shared sense of reality erodes, making individuals more susceptible to misinformation, manipulation, and extremist ideologies, which is believed to ultimately fuel authoritarian tendencies.

A second challenge involves the ostensible proclivity of certain lonely young males to exhibit misogynistic behaviours and potentially even engage in acts of violence. Tietjen and Tirkkonen (2023) argue that loneliness, misogyny, and violence are interconnected, using the incel community as a case study. Individuals in this group often experience significant social isolation, struggling to form friendships and intimate relationships, which leads to a desperate need for validation. According to

the authors, they frequently adopt the "black pill" ideology, a deterministic belief that they are doomed to remain lonely due to unchangeable traits. This worldview fosters despair and resentment, causing many incels to blame women for their exclusion. In extreme cases, the combination of loneliness and misogynistic rage has fuelled violent acts, as seen in Elliot Rodger's manifesto (2014).

The third challenge consist of perceived objectionable inequalities or inequities in the prevalence of loneliness, which may be deemed incompatible with ideals of moral and civic inequality (cf. Scanlon 2017). Such inequalities or inequities can include cases where certain groups experience higher rates of loneliness than the wider society, such as older adults and migrants (e.g. Olofsson et al. 2021). However, they might also include (potentially overlapping) cases where the loneliness is understood to result from unjust social norms or injustice that disproportionally affect certain groups, whether or not they end up suffering higher levels of loneliness overall. For example, in their introduction to a special issue on loneliness, the editors of *Feminist Theory* state that a key goal of the issue is to 'understand the ways that systems of oppression – white supremacy, settler colonialism, anti-queer bias, misogyny, neoliberal capitalism, and so on – create our lonely world' (Magnet and Orr 2022, 4), with some included articles examining how these alleged systems could contribute to loneliness among groups such as Black individuals (Charania 2022), Indigenous communities (Cvetkovich 2022), and intersex persons (Jones 2022).

2.2 State responsibility for loneliness

Another major topic of recent loneliness-related research in political philosophy is whether states have a moral responsibility for the loneliness of their residents. De Vries (2021) argues that, at minimum, states have a duty to help address loneliness when their policies significantly restrict social interactions, as happened during the COVID 19 pandemic when many governments imposed lockdowns to prevent the virus from spreading. Lederman (2021) and Lederman et al. (2024) assign responsibility for loneliness among Palestinians to the Israeli government. They argue that it intentionally fragments Palestinian communities by implementing separate legal systems and imposing movement restrictions in Israel, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza, which are understood to leave Palestinians socially and politically isolated.

Whereas the papers just mentioned focus on relatively contingent states of affairs, one addressing lockdowns and the others the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Kimberley Brownlee's work on state responsibility for loneliness has wider scope. In *Being Sure of Each Other* (2020), she contends that access to meaningful social connections is a fundamental human right, as vital as economic and political rights. She shows that companionship, inclusion, and physical closeness are essential for survival and well-being as opposed to being luxuries, leading her to argue that states should help

prevent and alleviate loneliness even in normal, non-emergency conditions (see also Brownlee 2022). For example, it is suggested that governments might need to encourage intergenerational contact, help maintain face-to-face customer service in commercial activities, designate community centres as multipurpose spaces for diverse groups to interact, educate children on the importance of safe non-associative interactions, ensure that public spaces are inclusive, and provide funding for social care and local activities (Brownlee 2020; 2022).

Brownlee's research on loneliness has sparked considerable debate within political philosophy in recent years, prompting responses in various forums, including an edited volume on social human rights (Brownlee, Jenkins, and Neal 2022) and a symposium in the journal *Criminal Law and Philosophy* published in 2023, which featured a reply by Brownlee (2023) to her critics. Some of these commentators are mostly sympathetic but argue that Brownlee has insufficiently acknowledged the unique significance of intimate relationships or overlooked certain valuable types of social connections altogether. Differentiating between basic social interactions (like those with service workers) from meaningful relationships (such as with family and friends), Couto (2022) proposes that access to meaningful relationships should be viewed as an independent right, emphasizing the importance of deep, lasting bonds. Similarly, Collins (2022) argues that deep, loving relationships require special legal recognition and that states have a responsibility to foster conditions that support such connections. Calhoun (2023) considers the scope of Brownlee's social human rights too narrow, contending that they should also protect and promote so-called 'social scaffolding connections' (i.e. social interactions that make an individual socially competent through sharing of knowledge, experiences, and feedback on social performance); 'including connections' (i.e. being included in shared activities, or collective goal, such as joining a book club or mass protest), and 'recognitional connections' (i.e. social connections that recognize individuals as fellow human beings rather than anonymous others, which can range from simple acts like assisting a stranger to deeper engagements, such as getting to know a colleague's background and interests).

In contrast, Brake (2022; 2023) and Gheaus (2022) have raised more fundamental concerns. Brake, while acknowledging the importance of sociality, argues that the potential for bullying and abuse significantly restricts the range of cases in which rights to access human connection should be prioritized. Specifically, she contends that, in many instances, the right to freedom of association (i.e. the right to choose whom to associate with) will carry greater normative weight and that states should ensure that efforts to promote social inclusion do not infringe upon personal autonomy. Gheaus (2022), for her part, cautions that policies aimed at promoting social inclusion may be counterproductive and must be balanced with policies that respect individuals' need for solitude, which she sees as important for developing self-awareness and emotional regulation.

Finally, a growing number of social scientists have advanced moral critiques suggesting that even states aiming to address loneliness often reinforce the very structures that produce it, though engagement on this topic between them and the political philosophers discussed earlier remains limited. Most notably, Eleanor Wilkinson (2022), Olivia Sagan (2024), and Elian Eve Jentoff, Tony Sandset, and Marit Haldar (2025) and Jentoff 2023) challenge the policy discourses on loneliness and specific interventions like social prescribing for wrongly framing it as a personal failing. Such depoliticisation, they argue, obscures the structural injustices—such as socio-economic inequality, poverty, and systemic discrimination—that underlie loneliness and which, in their view, states not only frequently neglect but even help to perpetuate.

2.3 State responses to loneliness

Still another body of work in political philosophy accepts that states should take steps to help address loneliness within their populations and explores what kinds of policy interventions might be desirable. As mentioned already, Brownlee believes that to ensure that people have adequate access to meaningful social relationships, states must ensure that people have adequate opportunities for social interaction by removing structural barriers such as poverty and discrimination and providing public spaces, libraries and accessible transport.

De Vries (2022) acknowledges the need for policies aimed at facilitating and promoting human sociability but identifies three other types of anti-loneliness that he argues are sometimes due: fostering and enabling social interaction with non-humans, such as pets and social robots; reshaping individuals' perceptions so they no longer see their relationships as deficient, or at least not as deficient as they currently view them; and alleviating the distress caused by the gap between people's desired relationships and their perceived actual social connections. Additionally, he defends legislation restricting face coverings, including burqas, on the ground that they hinder important micro-moments of connection between people – such as smiles and small talk – that are important for reducing loneliness (de Vries 2023).

Jenkins (2022) criticizes capitalist urban development and argues that social fragmentation and the feelings of loneliness to which it gives rise is a challenge in urban living, drawing on Park's description of the city as "some great hotel" (1952) where people meet but do not know each other. In his view, cities are not just built environments; they structure daily life and shape social interactions by either fostering or hindering inclusion. To promote social inclusion and civic engagement, then, he propose that governments should ensure that cities prioritize walkability, accessible public transport, vibrant public spaces, and housing stability for both residents and newcomers.

Tomalty (2022) argues that working conditions can only be considered just if they respect the full range of human rights, including those entitling individuals to opportunities for social connection. She contends that unstable work patterns, isolation, and unpredictable schedules undermine such opportunities and render it difficult to maintain even minimal social interaction.

A last noteworthy policy-focused philosophical paper is by Jecker et al. (2024). This article evaluates the use of Companion Digital Humans (CDHs) such as Replika and Bella, to address loneliness and social isolation. Although concerns about algorithmic bias, privacy, and the replacement of human relationships exist, the authors' contention is that these concerns do not count against deploying CDHs to address loneliness *tout court* and that this type of technology can be responsibly integrated into public health policies. They further argue that states should prioritize evidence-based research to evaluate the long-term advantages and risks of CDHs for various age groups, alongside policies that advocate for fair access to CDHs and digital literacy.

3. Conclusion

This review has surveyed recent contributions to the political philosophical literature on loneliness, organizing the discussion around three central themes: the political challenges that loneliness may pose; the extent of state responsibility in addressing loneliness; and the moral desirability of various policy interventions aimed at reducing it. While this body of work remains relatively small compared to those in other disciplines, it reflects a growing recognition that loneliness might not merely be a personal or medical concern, but also a phenomenon with important political aspects and implications.

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Brake critically examines Brownlee's arguments on social rights, particularly the claim that individuals have a right to be included in society. She questions whether this right imposes moral duties on others and highlights potential tensions between social inclusion and

personal autonomy. Brake explores cases where forced social engagement could be problematic, emphasizing that while relationships are valuable, they should not be mandated.

**Brownlee, Kimberley. 2020. *Being Sure of Each Other: An Essay on Social Rights and Freedoms*. New York: Oxford University Press.

In this book, Brownlee develops a theory of social human rights, arguing that people have a fundamental right to social inclusion and meaningful relationships. She critiques the assumption that freedom is primarily about individual autonomy, instead emphasizing the importance of interdependence. Brownlee explores loneliness, neglect, and social deprivation as serious harms that should be addressed through legal and policy measures.

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This article explores the ethical implications of using AI-driven digital humans to alleviate loneliness, particularly among vulnerable populations such as the elderly. The authors examine potential benefits, including companionship and mental health support, but also address risks such as deception, emotional dependency, and the undermining of genuine human relationships. They propose ethical guidelines and policy recommendations to ensure digital human interactions remain transparent, consensual, and beneficial.

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programs. De Vries contends that loneliness can have significant psychological and physical consequences, making it a critical area for state intervention.

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