
Pro Rege

Volume 37 | Number 4

Article 5

June 2009

Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection (Book Review)

Jessica Clevering
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Clevering, Jessica (2009) "Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 37: No. 4, 22 - 23.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol37/iss4/5

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Book Reviews

Cacioppo, John T., & Patrick, William. *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008. 317 pp. ISBN: 978-0-393-06170-3. Reviewed by Jessica Clevering, Instructor of Psychology at Dordt College, Iowa.

My housemate once said that loneliness is the emotional equivalent to chronic back pain: you wrestle yourself out of bed in the morning and push yourself through the day, but it is still always there.

Loneliness can cause this kind of pain because, according to psychologist and University of Chicago professor John Cacioppo, human beings require social connection. He should know: he has studied the individual in society for the past three decades. Cacioppo is perhaps best known for his work in the area of persuasion, but he has also conducted research in almost every area of social psychology, from political behavior to neuropsychology. Relevant to this book, Cacioppo conducts longitudinal research to track changes in loneliness over time and compares them to changes in physical health.

Cacioppo and his co-author, science writer William Patrick, use the results of this study and many others to illustrate the basic human need for social connection. Through his book, Cacioppo intends to “help the socially satisfied get from good to great, while at the same time helping the lonely regain control of their lives” (19). Although this goal seems like the thesis of a self-help book, Cacioppo dedicates most of the book to describing research rather than offering advice.

The first chapter primes the reader for a book about subjective feelings of loneliness and how to overcome them. Cacioppo begins by explaining the construct of loneliness and how it can be measured. The commonly-used UCLA Loneliness Scale contains questions like, “How often do you feel that no one knows you well?” and “How often do you feel that you lack companionship?” Cacioppo found that subjective feelings of loneliness (how lonely a person feels) were a better predictor of physical health than an objective measure of isolation (the actual number of friends and connections a person has).

The rest of the book is about its subtitle, *human nature and the need for social connection*, and the research that bears on this question. For example, Cacioppo describes studies in which participants who were made to feel socially rejected engaged in more imitative behaviors than those who were not rejected. Specifically, when some started shaking their foot, these participants more often began to shake their foot as well. In another study, participants were given a survey and the researchers pretended to calculate the results. Half of the participants were randomly selected

to be told that their results showed they would probably be alone for the rest of their lives. The other half of the participants were told they would probably always have meaningful relationships. The research revealed that when people were told that they would probably be alone for the rest of their lives, they performed more poorly on subsequent memorization and logic tests than people who were given the prediction of companionship. These studies suggest the importance of social connection for everyday functioning. In his overview of social connection, Cacioppo includes a range of research, such as oxytocin levels in prairie voles, sex behaviors among bonobos, obesity in friendship groups, and human sleep patterns. He uses plenty of case studies and examples to illustrate his points and comments on scholars from Hobbes and Descartes to Darwin and E.O. Wilson. He even includes poets like John Donne to emphasize the importance of social connection for human functioning.

In discussing social connections, however, he glosses over the distinction between loneliness (the subjective and negative emotion) and aloneness (objective social isolation). This is unfortunate, because Cacioppo’s own research shows that the two do not exist in a one-to-one correlation. A person who feels very lonely might have extensive social connections, and a person can be socially isolated without feeling lonely. Cacioppo especially neglects this distinction when he uses evolutionary psychology to explain the subjective feeling of loneliness as an adaptive reaction to isolation. Early human beings would have needed to be socially connected in order to survive in harsh environments. Those with the tendency and ability to make social connections and maintain social ties would have been more likely to survive by creating societies that divided labor and engaged in reciprocal care-taking. Those who were not part of a group would not survive to pass on their genes. Thus, loneliness is an emotion that signals the danger of ostracism, as the ostracized could not survive on their own. In other words, the negative emotion of loneliness should impel a person to seek community and thereby survive.

Cacioppo’s use of evolutionary psychology as an explanatory device detracts from the rich research he presents in his book, some of which seems to contradict his evolutionary explanation. For example, he states that loneliness is an adaptive emotion, driving people

to integrate into society. Later he states that loneliness is maladaptive because lonely persons are less able to focus their thoughts on mental tasks and are more obsessed with social cues. These drawbacks leave the lonely person unable to make the social connections that would reduce their loneliness. His evolutionary explanation claims that loneliness prompts people to make social connections in order to reduce the negative emotion of loneliness. But mere social connections do not do so. Instead, the research shows that people need *meaningful* connection to reduce loneliness. Cacioppo does not provide the reader with an evolutionary explanation of why meaningful relationships should provide more survival value, nor does he explain how loneliness changed from being adaptive to being maladaptive in our society.

Despite this confusion, one of the major benefits of this book is its broad scope. It brings many areas of psychological research to bear on the issue of social

connection and clearly shows the negative effects of living outside of community. Although its argument that loneliness is involved in the relationship between social connectedness and genetic survival is weak, the book is strong in showing the effects of meaningful connections on physical and mental well-being.

The book is very accessible, and the authors write clearly about research that is usually ensconced in technical jargon. This book would be an excellent starting point for those outside of psychology who are interested in social connection and isolation. If readers focus less on the evolutionary interpretations and more on the unique research, they can begin to see how important meaningful social connections are for spiritual flourishing and individual well-being. They can also take to heart the warning on extreme individualism. Living for the self is harmful to the self, and this is a conclusion with which Christians readers can especially agree.

David Brown, *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, xii + 464 pp. ISBN 9780199231829. £ 30. Reviewed by Alida Sewell, Instructor of French at Northwestern College, Orange City, IA, and doctoral student of Free University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. This review was originally published in *Church History and Religious Culture*, Volume 88, Number 2, 2008, pp. 302-305, which has given permission for this re-publication.

This book is the second of three related volumes. The first was *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (2004) and another appeared in April 2008 as *God and Mystery in Words: Experience through Metaphor and Drama*. Frequent references to the earlier and the later volumes (28 out of 1582 footnotes, plus references in the text) may tantalize the reader to seek out the other volumes in order to get the complete picture, although one suspects there is also some overlap. The subtitle of the present volume indicates the direction of Brown's argument, namely, that "all the world should be seen as sacramental, as imbued through and through with divine presence" (4). In this volume, Brown is particularly concerned with "how body might mediate experience of God" (3).

Brown divides his book into three parts: "Finding God in Bodies," "Ethereal and Material," and "The Eucharistic Body." He introduces the whole scope of the book and each section as well, preparing the reader for what is to come, not only in content but also in conclusions.

In the Introduction, Brown claims that "modern religion has become an optional extra, whereas through most of the history of religion it was seen as having a bearing on all aspects of life" (1). That may be the case in some streams of Christianity, but in neo-Kuyperian circles it is forcefully asserted that all of life is religion, that God is intimately concerned with all aspects of life, and that therefore all of life is to be lived unto God and under his rule. Brown, by contrast, employs a nature-grace duality of reasoning.

Brown appears to write from a high Anglican tradition (see footnote 116, p.162) but often sounds more Roman Catholic. He follows a Catholic trend of writing a "Theology of the Body." However, rather than give a theoretical account, Brown seeks to illustrate his views with examples from dance, art, and music to bring across his point about the body as graced. The human body as a creation of God is quickly linked to the body of Christ, in his incarnation, in the sacrament, in his resurrection and ascension (13). He returns to these themes in Part III. The divine presence in a graced body is what Brown seeks to reveal.

Brown seems to me to be derivative rather than original, as for example in his discussion of the "culture-relative dependence of specific notions of beauty of body" (29-30). Is there anyone who does not know this yet? Granted, not every reader will be familiar with all the examples he cites to prove his point, but this point, and others, has been made before, as can be seen by glancing at the footnotes. On the other hand, Brown makes general statements that seem to arise from his own experience but which could be challenged by others with a different personal reading or viewing histories. He states, "pornography is largely discussed in terms of freedom of expressions, scarcely at all with regard to the degree to which the forms of behaviour it popularizes appeal to an unhealthy male desire to dominate" (35).

In the Chapter on "The Dancer's Leap," Brown argues that dance may, under the right circumstances, by the