

The Ordeal of Solitude: Solitary Confinement in Prisons and Monasteries

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In scholarly circles, at least, the practice of solitary confinement in the prison system is widely recognized as an atrocity. Lisa Guenther, for example, calls it “the worst form of torture and the principle upon which all more determinate forms of torture are based”¹ – an indictment she bases on the idea that all torture ultimately aims at dismembering an individual’s sense of self, and that depriving people of all relation to an external world is one of the most efficient means of achieving this. Along these same lines, Derek S. Jeffreys argues that solitary confinement has become attractive to governments precisely because it provides a way to inflict “severe suffering to break the will of helpless inmates”² without leaving any obvious physical scars for critics to point to. He calls it a subtle attack on “spiritual realities [that] are difficult to quantify, and seem unreal in a world enthralled with science.”³ Speaking generally, both authors locate their critique along the same axis: to be healthy human beings, we must be able to maintain a consistent sense of self across time, and our ability to do so depends on our relationship to an external world that we care about, in which we aim at a future we have freely chosen; by depriving inmates of an external world, solitary confinement makes it impossible to project a future, which ultimately makes it impossible to sustain a coherent sense of self-identity across time. The result, often enough, is madness.

In this paper, I develop an alternative line of critique: instead of comparing the horrific dissolution that often occurs in solitary confinement to the healthy sense of self identity that usually obtains in “normal” life, I compare the experience of punitive solitary confinement in prisons to the experience of voluntary solitary confinement in monasteries or other spiritual retreats. The initial impetus for this project stems from the writings of French philosopher Bernard Stiegler and Hungarian journalist Arthur Koestler. Stiegler, who spent five years in prison for armed robbery, describes prison as “asceticism without end,”⁴ a prolonged “experience of the extra-ordinary [...],” of being “confronted with the limits of the conditions of intellectual life,”⁵ giving one’s inner life “that incommensurable depth and weight sought after by mystics.” Koestler, who spent three months in prison in Spain, much of which was spent in solitary, all of which was spent under the imminent threat of being taken from his cell at any time and summarily shot, describes solitary confinement as “a spiritual hothouse,” “a protracted, compulsory sojourn on the ‘tragic plane’ where every day is judgment day.”⁶ The language employed by both – “asceticism,” “mystics,” “spiritual,” “judgment day” – hearkens to one

¹ Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), xv.

² Derek S. Jeffreys, *Spirituality in Dark Places: the Ethics of Solitary Confinement* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 129.

³ Derek S. Jeffreys, *Spirituality in Dark Places: the Ethics of Solitary Confinement*, 130.

⁴ Bernard Stiegler, “How I Became a Philosopher,” in *Acting Out*, trans. David Barison, Daniel Ross, and Patrick Crogan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 19.

⁵ Stiegler, “How I Became A Philosopher,” 17.

⁶ Arthur Koestler, *The Invisible Writing* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956), 356-57.

important aspect of solitary confinement that neither Guenther nor Jeffreys is able to account for: the fact that numerous religious traditions encourage the practice of extended solitude as a crucible through which to encourage spiritual growth.

Koestler's experience in particular provides a good lens through which to view the limits of Guenther and Jeffreys' line of analysis. Thus, in the first few days of his ordeal, a meditation on Euclid's proof for the infinity of prime numbers transformed into a sense of complete personal dissolution: "I was floating on my back in a river of peace, under bridges of silence. It came from nowhere and flowed nowhere. Then there was no river and no I. The I had ceased to exist."⁷ Several weeks later, he undertook a daily self-examination to determine precisely how much of his body he would be willing to sacrifice in order to save the lives of the two fellow prisoners he was allowed to meet each afternoon: "I found that I was willing to give one limb for each, but only in the form of one leg and one arm and not both of the same kind; that under torture I would soon break down and forsake them; and that I was willing to give my life for their joint lives, but not for a single one."⁸ Practicing this meditation day after day with a grisly yet unwavering honesty, Koestler eventually came to the realization that he was ready to die for the sake of either: "it struck me as self-evident, in the manner of twice two being four, that we were all responsible for each other – not only in the superficial sense of social responsibility, but because, in some inexplicable manner, we partook of the same substance or identity."⁹ In short, the experience of punitive solitary confinement provided an environment within which Koestler came to realize Leviticus 19:17 – "you shall love your neighbor as yourself"¹⁰ – except not as a commandment so much as a phenomenological description of reality as it actually is. The phrase "twice two being four," meanwhile, reverberates with Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, in a passage in which the narrator grapples with the opposite understanding of the reality beneath appearances:

[...] the laws of nature, the conclusions of natural science, of mathematics [...]
When they prove to you that in reality one drop of your own fat must be dearer to you than a hundred thousand of your fellow creatures, and that this conclusion is the final solution of all so-called virtues and duties and all such ravings and prejudices, then you might as well accept it, you can't do anything about it, because two times two is a law of mathematics. Just try refuting it.¹¹

In this context, Koestler's experience of solitary confinement is a kind of refutation: this ersatz scientific theory shows itself, to the resident of solitude, to be manifestly and obviously false. To such a person, an entirely different dialectic begins to unfold: this supposedly "scientific" proof

⁷ Koestler, *The Invisible Writing*, 352.

⁸ Koestler, *The Invisible Writing*, 355.

⁹ Koestler, *The Invisible Writing*, 355-56.

¹⁰ Leviticus 19:17, NRSV.

¹¹ Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground and The Grand Inquisitor*, trans. Ralph E. Matlaw (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1991), 12.

of universal human selfishness becomes the false appearance, propped up by an individual or a culture as a way to flee the “real” truth, the almost overwhelming reality of universal responsibility of all for all – as articulated in another of Dostoevsky’s works, *The Brothers Karamazov*, in the words of a dying child: “‘Mother, my dearest heart,’ he said (he had begun using such caressing, such unexpected words just then), ‘my dearest heart, my joy, you must realize that everyone is responsible for everyone and everything. I don’t know how to explain it to you, but I feel it so strongly that it hurts.’”¹²

The problem with the analytic strategy employed by both Guenther and Jeffreys, whereby “normal” life is taken as the “normative” criterion against which to measure the pathology of enforced solitude, is that it can only account for what Koestler’s kind of experience by dismissing it as self-delusion. Guenther, for example, explicitly calls such experiences a “survival strategy” that will only serve to increase the difficulty of assimilating back to “normal” life: “Prisoners who manage not to disintegrate under the pressure of intensive confinement may feel like they contain an infinite universe within themselves. But even this survival strategy can deepen the gulf between the prisoner and the rest of the world.”¹³ While this statement is certainly true of Koestler, who had tremendous difficulties bridging the gulf between the reality as it appeared in the depths of prison and the reality that he eventually returned to in the “normal” world, this same problem will be faced by anyone who encounters such strange and counter-intuitive realities: how do we bridge the gulf between the experienced revelation, its memory once it passes, and the necessities of mundane life that must inevitably recommence? The problem, again, is that Guenther is considering solitary confinement only insofar as it is practiced in prisons, one of the most violent manifestation of the phenomenon. This would be like trying to understand human sexuality by studying only rape, the experience of mortality by studying only murder.

The gambit of this paper, in this context, is simple: if Koestler’s experience is precisely as he says it is, not a survival strategy but a veil falling, putting him “in touch with ‘real reality’ [...] normally obscured by layers of irrelevancy,”¹⁴ then we immediately have a precise account of why various religion traditions promote the practice of solitude, as well as a potential line of research that might furnish us with useful insights into the nature of solitude and the reason why the inmates of our modern prison system have a tendency to go insane. In short, we can examine the various traditions of solitary practice on the assumption that such traditions might know something about what they are doing. In the *Crito*, Socrates suggests that “a man professionally engaged in physical training [should] pay attention to the praise and blame [...] of one man only, namely a doctor or trainer.”¹⁵ So too, if we want to understand the type of mental training required to endure extended periods of alone, we might be wise to consult the experts in the field – and then, from the context of this expert opinion, to judge and possibly condemn what is being

¹² Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* 1, trans. David Magarshack (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969), 339

¹³ Guenther, *Solitary Confinement*, 198-99.

¹⁴ Koestler, *The Invisible Writing*, 352.

¹⁵ Plato, *Crito*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, Ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 47b.

done to the inmates of our prisons. This paper will examine how punitive solitary confinement looks if, instead of the standard of “normal” life, we take the practice of monastic solitude as the standard of critique.

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Jeffreys, for his part, explicitly acknowledges that “spirituality” is “a side of solitary that few scholars consider.”¹⁶ He goes on to position his own project as an attempt to come to an understanding of “solitary’s spiritual damage as distinct from psychological harm.”¹⁷ However, while making the obvious and correct point that “[punitive] Solitary’s involuntary character [...] sharply distinguishes it from other forms of isolation,”¹⁸ his analysis of the motivations of spiritual solitaries is surprisingly insubstantial: such practitioners, he suggests, “value isolation, holding that it has some spiritual significance,” partly because they “receive validation for isolation from the world.”¹⁹ 20th century Cistercian Thomas Merton, something of an expert in the practice of solitude, explicitly rejects “receiving validation” as a sanitary motivation:

to fly into the desert in order to be extra-ordinary is only to carry the world with you as an implicit standard of comparison. The result would be nothing but self-contemplation, and self-contemplation with the negative standard of the world one had abandoned. Some of the monks of the Desert did this, as a matter of fact: and the only fruit of their trouble was that they went out of their heads.²⁰

According to Merton, in other words, if you undertake the ordeal of solitude in order to receive social validation, you will very likely go mad. Why? If not for the sake of prestige within one’s particular religious community, what could possibly motivate an individual to undertake this kind of ascetic practice? One might be tempted to reply that the desert ascetics must have already been crazy – or that because certain pre-modern societies imbued madness with spiritual significance, it would have been in the self-interest of rational individuals in these societies to drive themselves a bit out of their minds. The kind of answer implies a particular understanding of the relationship between normal rationality and whatever lies beyond it: that rationality is sanity, beyond which lies an undifferentiated irrational madness. The experts in solitude, however, insist that beyond the realm of normal rationality exist two bifurcating possibilities. Consider the following passage from 20th century hermit Carlo Carretto:

Solitude is a serious, demanding affair and no one succeeds in overcoming the difficulties all at once. [...] For anyone who stays alone on the mountainside for forty days the alternatives are clear-cut: either one finds God and therefore happiness, or else one runs away, seized by fear and boredom. Most of the

¹⁶ Jeffreys, *Spirituality in Dark Places*, 3.

¹⁷ Jeffreys, *Spirituality in Dark Places*, 6.

¹⁸ Jeffreys, *Spirituality in Dark Places*, 11.

¹⁹ Jeffreys, *Spirituality in Dark Places*, 10.

²⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 22.

brethren I come across are among those who find God. And so, I have discovered what light means in the face of a man who stands face to face with the Transcendent. [...] Heaven does indeed exist, for here was heaven. It exists already within each one of us when we exist in God.”²¹

According to Carretto, the experience of solitude will coalesce into one of two possibilities: one either finds God, sanctity, or one runs away in fear and boredom. Immediately, a potential critique of punitive solitary confinement presents itself: what would happen to the person who was seized by fear and boredom in a situation from which it was impossible to flee? A critique of the theoretical structure of Guenther and Jeffreys also manifests: why consider only the spiritual damage of solitude? Why not also consider its potential spiritual benefits? More importantly, however, a line of potentially positive research also presents itself: what kind of techniques do traditions of solitary practice recommend to ensure that the experience inclines toward God instead of madness, heaven instead of hell?

We have already briefly encountered some such practices, as fortuitously stumbled across by Arthur Koestler: first, the use of mathematics in an almost Platonic fashion, to build a bridge of rational symbols between the finite and the infinite; second, a daily meditation on the precise amount of bodily mutilation he would be willing to endure for the sake of his companions. Stiegler also speaks about surviving his sojourn in prison by means of a rigorous practice, transforming his self into “an ensemble of disciplines,”²² a personal culture whereby he imposed difference upon the oceanic sameness of prison temporality, whereby he constructed a world in the absence of world, without which he repeatedly states that he “would have become insane.”²³ Given the obvious dangers of prolonged solitude, it seems reasonable to assume that the ancient traditions would have developed similar practices. I will now examine one such practice that seems to be common across a wide spectrum of different traditions: the recognition of a necessity to cultivate good will towards others before attempting to endure being alone. As we shall see, if this practice is indeed based upon a legitimate expertise in a reliable if somewhat rarified aspect of experience, this critique will serve not only to expose the horror of punitive solitary confinement. It will also serve as the opening move in a larger refutation, an argument against the implicit ontological claims of the culture that is building so many prisons in so many places around the world.

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In an essay appended to the 1984 edition of *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Victor Frankl succinctly states a great phenomenological discovery of the concentration camps:

Sigmund Freud once asserted, “Let one attempt to expose a number of the most diverse people uniformly to hunger. With the increase of the imperative urge of

²¹ Carlo Carretto, *In Search of the Beyond*, Trans. Sarah Fawcett (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975), 69.

²² Stiegler, “How I Became a Philosopher,” 20.

²³ Stiegler, “How I Became a Philosopher,” 19.

hunger all individual differences will blur, and in their stead will appear the uniform expression of the one unstilled urge.” Thank heaven, Sigmund Freud was spared knowing the concentration camps from the inside. His subjects lay on a couch designed in the plush style of Victorian culture, not in the filth of Auschwitz. There, the “individual differences” did not “blur” but, on the contrary, people became more different: people unmasked themselves, both the swine and the saints. And today you need no longer hesitate to use the word “saints”: think of Father Maximilian Kolbe who was starved and finally murdered by an injection of carbolic acid at Auschwitz and who in 1983 was canonized.²⁴

Although the environment of a solitary confinement cell and a death camp are certainly very different, they are the same in that the inmates of both have been utterly and violently sundered from their normal milieu. In solitary, according to Carretto, one either becomes a lunatic or a saint. In the death camp, according to Frankl, one either becomes a swine or a saint. This latter bifurcation hearkens to the question that Kierkegaard, in *Philosophical Fragments*, dubs “the Absolute Paradox,”²⁵ the question he argues that human beings cannot help but ask but also cannot possibly answer, a question originally posed by Socrates in Plato’s *Phaedrus*: “Am I a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon, or am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature.”²⁶ Something about being an inmate in a death camp, it would seem, forces people to pick which of these two possible answers they are going to imply with their choices. Could it be that something about solitude forces people to realize which of these two options they have already implied with the choices they have already made? And could it be that, to the extent that someone has implied that he or she is really just a complicated and savage beast, that person will experience extended solitude as a terrifying nightmare?

Consider the following advice from Desert father Lucius: “If you have not first of all lived rightly with men, you will not be able to live rightly in solitude.”²⁷ This same advice is given by the 10th century French monk Grimlaicus in his famous *Rule for Solitaries*, as he discusses how to ascertain if an individual is ready to be permanently walled into a room in a monastery:

If you are endeavoring to rise up to the peak of the contemplative life, you should first test yourself through many trials in the active life. Can you bear injuries? Can you endure abuse, slander, mockery, insults, and beatings? If you can patiently endure these and similar things, whether they are inflicted by the devil or by another person, then you will someday be able to fly up to the contemplative life.

²⁴ Victor Frankl, “The Case for a Tragic Optimism,” in *Man’s Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1984), 178-79.

²⁵ Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 37.

²⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, 230a.

²⁷ quoted in John D. Barbour, *The Value of Solitude: The Ethics and Spirituality of Aloneness in Autobiography* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 20.

In the active life, all the vices are to be eliminated by the practice of good works, so that in the contemplative life you may with pure attention go on to contemplate God.²⁸

Finally, lest this strange parallel between solitude and society be taken as some curious predilection of Western culture, this exact same stipulation can be found in the tradition of Vipassana meditation as taught by the late S. N. Goenka. In short, although anyone is allowed to take the introductory ten day course – which mimics the conditions of solitary confinement as much as practically possible – those who wish to qualify for a longer course, from twenty to sixty days in length, must first have committed to a daily practice of meditation as well as a strict code of morality: no killing, no lying, no stealing, no sexual impropriety, and no intoxicants. These rules exist not as arbitrary commandments but rather because it is not safe to strip away the veil of what we actually are until we have become the kind of person who can stand the sight. Here too, a potential critique of punitive solitary confinement presents itself: if father Lucius, Grimlaicus, and Goenka are right, it might be a bad idea to force people who have perhaps not lived rightly with others to endlessly endure their own company.

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This paper has only managed to scratch the surface of a much vaster topic. I began by arguing that, instead of gauging the horror of punitive solitary confinement by the standards of our own normal sense of self-identity, we should measure it by the standard of monastic solitary confinement. In both cases, the normal self-identity dissolves, but in the former case this self-identity is violently stripped away, while in the latter it is voluntarily given up. What once was there is no longer there, but in the former case this absence will likely be filled with hatred for the perpetrators. From here, I showed, first, how monastic communities are well aware of the dangers of solitude, and suggested that they might also be aware of techniques for how solitude can be practiced well. As a first point in this direction, I first suggested that monastic solitude recognizes that some people might need to run away if things get too intense, but punitive solitude forecloses this possibility. After this, I noted how numerous traditions insist that it is necessary to live well with others before undertaking life alone.

This last point leads to an interesting reflection on the relationship between lunacy, sanctity, and savagery. The initial idea, that beyond average everyday rationality lies an undifferentiated madness, gave way to the idea that this beyond is in fact split between sanctity and lunacy. But from the perspective of sanctity, is it not possible that average rationality appears as just another kind of insanity, a kind of collective insanity, a repressed insanity that allows those who suffer from it to temporarily avoid the consequences of their actions? In solitary, the choice is between sanctity and lunacy, while in the death camp, the choice is between sanctity and savagery. Perhaps average everyday rationality is like a veil of goodness covering a kind of lunatic savagery – and this veil can only maintain itself to the extent that one

²⁸ Grimlaicus, *Rule for Solitaries*, trans. Andrew Thornton, OSB, (Liturgical Press: Collegeville, Minnesota, 2011), 43.

resides in a relatively peaceful milieu. Perhaps solitary confinement is so tremendously dangerous because it makes the dark underbelly of this veil impossible to avoid beholding – as in the following lines from the Book of Job:

I am blameless; I do not know myself;
I loathe my life.²⁹

In our “normal” lives, we maintain the illusion that we are blameless by avoiding uncomfortable self-knowledge. The realization that perhaps we do not know ourselves, therefore, brings this illusion of blamelessness into doubt. Finally, insofar as we were guilty of such self-deception, the path of self-discovery will need to pass through the portal of self-loathing. Perhaps extended solitude, by removing the possibility of using the world as a distraction, makes such self-discovery more difficult to avoid. And perhaps the techniques of monastic solitude would consist in the art of patiently lingering with these feelings in an environment specifically designed to remind us, against the continual temptation to forget, that God is waiting at the end of the whirlwind.

²⁹ Job 9:21 NRSV