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From the Perspective of Affective Phenomenology: The Transformation of Loneliness in Modern Society

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Abstract: Loneliness in modern society has evolved from an individual psychological problem into a universal existential issue. The popularization of digital media, expansion of performance logic and symbolization of communication endow loneliness with the traits of alienation, burnout and existential homelessness. Centered on Heidegger's ontology and from the perspective of affective phenomenology, this paper systematically interprets the essence and transformation of loneliness by integrating media philosophy, bodily phenomenology and contemporary critical social theory. This study argues that loneliness is not a contingent psychological emotion, but an innate existential attunement of Dasein. As the core authentic attunement, Angst bears the ontological function of recalling Dasein from the inauthentic "they-self" back to its own potentiality-for-Being. The concept of Enframing proposed by Heidegger further simplifies language into a mere information tool, which gradually conceals, co-opts and distorts human authentic experience of loneliness. The core dilemma of contemporary loneliness lies not in the deepening of its intensity, but the alienation of its essence: it degenerates from an attunement that awakens authentic existence into homogeneous inner weariness and emptiness. The core mission of philosophy is not to eliminate loneliness entirely, but to arouse people's conscious awareness of authentic loneliness, so as to rebuild Dasein's dwelling place and the primordial home of Being.

Keywords: loneliness; Affective Phenomenology; Heidegger; Media Technology; Achievement Society; Intercorporeity; Enframing; Authenticity

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Problem Proposition

In modern society thoroughly permeated by digital media, online communication, virtual presence and symbolic interaction have become daily routines. Though people are surrounded by massive information and social connections, they generally sink into a deeper sense of loneliness. This loneliness is no longer confined to the psychological lack of social interaction, but extends to existential alienation, alienated emotional expression and drifting self-identity. The generalization and pathologization of loneliness have become typical representations of modernity's predicament.

Most existing studies are carried out from psychological, sociological or communication perspectives. They either regard loneliness as a mental disorder or attribute its causes to social structures and media usage habits, yet few trace the origin of loneliness based on affective phenomenology and existential ontology. Accordingly, this paper puts forward three core research questions: What ontological foundation does loneliness possess? How do digital media and technological logic reshape the form and connotation of loneliness? What internal transmission mechanism turns authentic attunement into pathological burnout? The answers to these questions constitute the starting point of this research.

1.2 Domestic and Overseas Research Status

Overseas research is rooted in the theoretical traditions of existentialism and phenomenology. Heidegger constructs an analytical framework for loneliness based on the concepts of Befindlichkeit, Angst and boredom[1,2]; Byung-Chul Han carries out critiques of modern emotional discipline relying on the theories of achievement society and burnout society[3,4]; McLuhan, Baudrillard, Stiegler and Kittler analyze how human relations with the world are reconstructed from the dimension of media technology[5-8]; Merleau-Ponty and Levinas interpret the primordial conditions of genuine communication from bodily phenomenology and the ethics of the

Other respectively[9,10]; Eva Illouz's studies on emotional quantification and instrumentalization provide vital theoretical support for this paper's analysis of emotional alienation[11]. Domestic research mostly focuses on psychological measurement, social influence and media effects of loneliness. In recent years, theoretical papers combining loneliness with phenomenology and existentialism have gradually emerged, but few studies integrate affective phenomenology, media philosophy, bodily theory and social criticism into a unified analytical framework[12-15].

1.3 Research Ideas and Methods

This paper comprehensively adopts textual interpretation, phenomenological analysis and interdisciplinary criticism. Centered on Heidegger's theory of attunement[1,2], it successively enters four analytical dimensions including media ontology, bodily phenomenology, the ethics of the Other and technological criticism, sorting out the generative logic of loneliness's distortion[5-10]. The full text follows the research thread: ontological foundation – morphological transformation – mechanism criticism – path reflection.

1.4 Research Innovations

Breaking the dual limitation of psychologism and instrumentalism, this paper interprets loneliness within Dasein's existential structure[1]; it integrates multiple theoretical resources such as digital media, achievement society, intercorporeity and linguistic Enframing to build a unified analytical framework[3-6,9], and clearly illustrates the complete transformation of loneliness from "awakening authenticity" to "alienated emptiness". This paper proposes that the core contradiction of loneliness lies in its essential distortion rather than intensification, offering a brand-new ontological interpretation for modern people's emotional predicament.

2. Media Transformation and Modern Human's Ontological Foundation

2.1 The Medium is the Message: From Tool to Ontological Apparatus

McLuhan put forward the classic statement "the medium is the message", pointing out that media are never neutral tools but core forces reshaping human modes of perception and lifestyles[5]. The iteration of media itself rewrites the connection between humans and the world far more profoundly than the information they carry. Based on the theories of simulacra and hyperreality, Baudrillard further argued that digital media cover reality with symbols, erase the boundary between reality and virtuality, and replace human authentic bodily experience with symbolic simulation[6]. Media are no longer mere carriers of information, but ontological apparatuses that stipulate how the world presents itself[5,6].

2.2 Technology and Time: Industrialization of Memory and Dasein's Historicity

Stiegler defines technology as "tertiary retention", namely the externalized carrier of human memory[7]. Technology bears, stores and transmits human experience via material media, forming the foundation of intergenerational inheritance and historical consciousness. Digital technology promotes the industrialization of memory, restructuring human perception of time, intergenerational transmission and the continuity of tradition[7]. Dasein's historical footing is shaken, and humans are thrown into instantaneous, fragmented temporal currents, laying an ontological premise for the wide spread of loneliness.

2.3 Discourse Network: Media's Restriction on Perception and Expression

Kittler's discourse network theory holds that media technology demarcates the boundary of what humans can speak, perceive and think[8]. Media do not merely transmit content, but pre-construct all conditions for the generation of meaning. In the era of digital media, human perceptual framework, modes of emotional expression and logic of self-cognition are all shaped by technological structures, and human Being-in-the-world is thoroughly mediated by technology[8]. Technology is no longer an external auxiliary, but embedded within Dasein's existential structure.

3. The Ontological Foundation of Loneliness: Heidegger's Analysis of Attunement

3.1 Fundamental Befindlichkeit: Loneliness as Dasein's Essential Attunement

In Being and Time, Heidegger proposed that fundamental Befindlichkeit is the primordial existential mode through which Dasein is thrown into the world[1]. Humans always face the world with specific moods, which intuitively reveal Dasein's thrownness and Being-in-the-world.

Loneliness is not a psychological feeling acquired after birth, but a core component embedded in Dasein's existential structure[1]. Humans are thrown into existence as independent individuals, and no one can take over their own Being for them; this existential fact determines that loneliness is an inalienable stipulation of Dasein[1].

It is necessary to clearly demarcate the boundaries of several easily confused concepts: loneliness is not equivalent to solitude, social isolation or Angst. Solitude refers only to an external spatial state, which may accompany or separate from loneliness; social isolation is an external objective reality of insufficient social resources; Angst is a primordial authentic attunement, while loneliness is the existential experience triggered by Angst. Therefore, loneliness is not Being itself, but an authentic existential experience rooted in Dasein's thrownness and aroused by Angst, and one of the key types of fundamental Befindlichkeit.

3.2 Angst and Nothingness: The Awakening Function of Authentic Loneliness

Angst is essentially different from fear which targets specific objects; what Angst fears is Being as such[1]. Without definite objects, Angst pulls Dasein out of the inauthentic state of indulging in "the They" and lets it confront its unique potentiality-for-Being[1]. Such confrontation is inevitably accompanied by fundamental loneliness. In this sense, loneliness is by no means a negative emotion, but a crucial opportunity to open up authentic existence[1]. It liberates people from homogenized mass opinions and pushes them to face their own existential possibilities[1].

3.3 Boredom and Emotional Consumption: The Concealment of Authentic Loneliness

Preliminary Distinction of Concepts

To avoid the mixing of ontological concepts, psychological symptoms and social critical concepts, four core concepts are defined first:

1) Ontological loneliness: The primordial existential attunement in Heidegger's theory, with positive existential value to awaken authenticity;

2) Psychological loneliness: Subjective negative emotions mostly generated by long-term lack of social interaction;

3) Social isolation: The external existential situation of insufficient interpersonal connections at the objective level, an inducement of psychological loneliness;

4) Burnout and depression: Pathological psychological symptoms generated by the discipline of achievement society, products after ontological loneliness is concealed and alienated.

Complete alienation transmission chain: primordial ontological loneliness (authentic and positive) → symbolic media communication and self-discipline of achievement society conceal authentic attunement → humans fail to confront their own Being → transform into negative psychological loneliness → accumulate over time and evolve into burnout, depression and other psychological illnesses.

In The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics, Heidegger divides boredom into three layers, among which abyssal boredom fully unfolds Dasein's overall existential situation[2]. Boredom reveals the emptiness of the world and Dasein's homelessness, which could promote humans to step toward authenticity[2]. However, modern society dispels boredom through constant sensory stimulation, entertainment consumption and information bombardment, a phenomenon defined by Han as "the excess of positivity"[3]. Such emotional consumption conceals primordial Angst, makes people take the initiative to escape loneliness, and completely misses the path back to the authentic self[1-3].

4. Distorted Forms of Modern Loneliness

4.1 Alienation of Communication: Physical Absence and Symbolic Interaction

4.1.1 Intercorporeity: the origin of authentic communication

Merleau-Ponty's bodily phenomenology holds that all genuine communication is built upon intercorporeity[9]. Communication is not the mere transmission of symbols, but perceptual resonance and mutual empathy between bodies[9]. Postures, facial expressions, physical touch and shared space constitute the primordial field of meaning generation[9]. Only in bodily co-presence can the Other manifest to the self in a complete and vivid manner[9].

4.1.2 Disappearance of the other: ethical dilemma of digital communication

Levinas proposed that ethical relations originate from face-to-face encounter with the visage, and the infinity of the Other breaks the self's closed cycle[10]. Digital media simplify communication into symbolic coding; physical absence weakens the dimension of the Other, trapping humans in a homogeneous echo chamber[6,10]. Communication no longer faces the genuine

Other, but turns into a closed loop of self-confirmation, continuously aggravating enclosed psychological loneliness[6,10].

4.2 Emotional Discipline: Achievement Society and the Pathologization of Loneliness

4.2.1 From disciplinary society to achievement society

Byung-Chul Han put forward that modern society has completed the transformation from Foucauldian disciplinary society to achievement society[4]. Subjects are no longer suppressed by external prohibitions, but take the initiative to exploit themselves in the name of self-fulfillment[4]. Efficiency, optimization and output become the supreme criteria, and all emotions and interpersonal relationships are incorporated into the performance evaluation system[4]. Humans are no longer obedient subjects under discipline, but performance agents who actively oppress themselves[4].

4.2.2 Technologization and alienation of emotions

Eva Illouz proposed the concept of "technologization of emotions": emotions are quantified, standardized and transformed into calculable capital elements[11]. Emotions are no longer channels for the disclosure of Being, but objects to be evaluated and optimized for exchange[11]. Primordial attunement is flattened, and ontological Angst gradually transforms into burnout, anxiety and depression in the psychological dimension[1,3,11]. According to the intermediary chain mentioned above, the two intermediate mechanisms of symbolic media communication and self-exploitation under performance contribute to the degradation from ontological loneliness to psychological illnesses.

4.3 The Oblivion of Language: Enframing and Human Homelessness

4.3.1 Enframing: the ontological essence of technology

In his later works, Heidegger proposed that the essence of modern technology is Enframing[2]. Through challenging and ordering, Enframing transforms nature and humans all into disposable standing-reserves[2]. The world loses its mystery and existential meaning, reduced to a mere warehouse of resources[2]. The relationship between humans and Being shifts from listening and guardianship to domination and exploitation[2].

4.3.2 Language degraded from the house of being to a mere tool

Language is originally the house of Being, the carrier through which humans dwell in the world via saying[2]. After the logic of Enframing permeates language, language is simplified into a pure information tool, losing its primordial function of naming and disclosing Being[2]. Humans lose their dwelling place in language, falling into ontological homelessness, and loneliness turns into wandering existential perplexity[2].

5. Reflection and Criticism on the Distortion of Modern Loneliness

5.1 Superficial Causes: Media, Consumption and Performance Pressure

Digital media provide virtual compensation, replacing bodily co-presence with symbolic presence[5-6,9]; consumer culture covers profound existential anxiety through constant sensory stimulation[3]; the achievement society enforces self-optimization and calculates all emotions based on utility[4]. The three factors jointly squeeze the living space of authentic attunement, and under the effect of intermediary mechanisms, ontological loneliness alienates into burnout, emptiness and depression[3].

5.2 In-depth Logic: Concealment at the Ontological Level

The root cause of modern loneliness's distortion lies in that technology, as an integral ontological apparatus, dominates all human life[5-8]; Enframing conceals the truth of Being[2], primordial Angst is continuously assimilated and co-opted[1-2], Dasein loses the possibility to confront its own Being, which ultimately causes the distortion of loneliness[1-4]. The core contradiction is not excessive loneliness, but the concealment of authentic ontological loneliness and the overflow of inauthentic psychological emptiness[1-3].

5.3 Criticism on the Idea of "Eliminating Loneliness"

Mainstream mass culture regards loneliness as a defect to be cured, attempting to completely dispel it through social interaction, entertainment and digital technology. However, loneliness belongs to Dasein's inherent existential structure, which can neither be eradicated nor ought to be eliminated[1]. The real way out is not to escape loneliness, but to arouse authentic loneliness and

make it a path leading back to authentic existence[1,2].

6. Return to Authenticity: Feasible Paths out of Alienated Loneliness

6.1 Return to the Body: Rebuild Face-to-Face Ethical Encounter

Return to scenarios of bodily co-presence, reconstruct intercorporeal communication, respect the visage and infinity of the Other[9-10], break the closed loop of symbolic communication, and take face-to-face ethical encounter as the starting point to resist alienated loneliness.

6.2 Reject Performance Compulsion: Return to Authentic Self from Self-Exploitation

Reflect on the compulsory optimization logic of achievement society, abandon endless self-exploitation[4], acknowledge human finitude, recognize the positive ontological value of loneliness[1], and let Dasein return from performance subject to its own authentic potentiality-for-Being.

6.3 Guard Language: Restore Language as the House of Being

Resist the instrumentalization of language, recover the capacity of naming, meditation and poetic speech[2], and enable humans to dwell in Being via language again. Counter the ordering logic of Enframing with poetry and rebuild the home of Being[2].

7. Conclusion

From the perspective of affective phenomenology and existential ontology, this paper proves that loneliness is not a mental illness, but an inalienable fundamental Befindlichkeit of Dasein[1]. Authentic loneliness aroused by Angst bears the core value of awakening Dasein to return to its own potentiality-for-Being[1]. Three forces including digital media, achievement society and technological Enframing jointly distort the essence of loneliness: primordial ontological attunement is concealed, assimilated and transformed, finally externalized into experiences of burnout, emptiness and homelessness[2-4,6]. Therefore, the core predicament of modern society is not the intensification of loneliness, but the alienation of its primordial existential meaning.

The task of philosophy is not to help humans escape loneliness, but to arouse conscious awareness of authentic loneliness and recognize its irreplaceable ontological status[1]. Only by confronting primordial ontological loneliness can humans rebuild genuine bodily communication, resist the technologization of emotions, guard the poetic origin of language, and lead Dasein out of alienated loneliness back to the home of Being[1,2,9].

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