An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts

Existenz

Volume 14, No 2, Fall 2019 ISSN 1932-1066

Homebound
Hikikomori and the Phenomenology of Radical Social Withdrawal

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Abstract: The increasing number of worldwide cases of hikikomori casts into doubt the traditional notion of hikikomori as being merely a culture-bound syndrome. The response from social psychiatry has been to push for defined diagnostic guidelines, transforming hikikomori into a psychiatric condition. This essay provides an existential account of radical social withdrawal; it specifically draws on the philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas and bioethicist Fredrik Svenaeus' Heideggerian concept of "unhomelikeness" in order to elucidate the relationship between hikikomori, solitude, time, and home. Thus, it introduces the possibility that in addition to external factors such as culture or mental illness, social withdrawal is an individual choice that occurs worldwide.

Keywords: Levinas, Emmanuel; Svenaeus, Fredrik; psychiatry; existentialism; withdrawal; culture; medicine; solitude; isolation.

Introduction

The recent publication of America's first adolescent case report of hikikomori is troubling to scholars who are active in the international social psychiatry environment.[1] According to Bommersbach and Millard, their report on seventeen-year old "Mr. H" is but one case amongst an overwhelming literature suggesting that hikikomori is not strictly a Japanese phenomenon. In this context, Takahiro Kato, Kanba, and Teo argue that the past decade of academic research has challenged the mainstream image of dependent and socially withdrawn Japanese men, as they record cases of hikikomori in countries as diverse as Spain, South Korea, Nigeria, and Oman.[2] Their research gradually developed an understanding of and interest in the cross-cultural dimension of radical withdrawal and contradicts Michael Zielenziger's conclusion in his authoritative book, *Shutting Out the Sun*, namely that hikikomori is a culture-bound syndrome occurring exclusively in Japan.[3] His misconception has increasingly become the dominant theory of hikikomori, so much so that the Oxford Dictionary published a new entry for hikikomori in its 2010 online

[1] Tanner Bommersbach and Hun Millard, "No longer Culture-Bound: Hikikomori Outside of Japan," *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 65/6 (September 2019), 539-540.

[2] Takahiro A. Kato, Shigenobu Kanba, and Alan R. Teo, "Hikikomori: Multidimensional Understanding, Assessment, and Future International Perspectives," *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 73/8 (August 2019), 427-440.

[3] Michael Zielenziger, *Shutting Out the Sun: How Japan Created Its Own Lost Generation*, New York, NY: Doubleday Random House, 2006. [Henceforth cited as *SOS*]

version as "(in Japan) the abnormal avoidance of social contact, typically by adolescent males."[4] There is some fundamental irony to this bias that has become a gut-level instinct, that hikikomori—if one is to presuppose it as being a problem and the psychopathological legacy of Japan's unique economic and cultural malaise—must be tied to a single society before solutions can be addressed. This is not only the case because research sets out to finding such boundaries, but also because the issue of being bound in itself is the crux of what it is to be hikikomori. The Japan-centric model cannot engage in a culture-independent phenomenology of being homebound, a word that means both "confined to home" and "searching for a home." A re-conception of social withdrawal that recognizes its passive and active drives will see hikikomori as not just a reasonable and expected response to societal alienation as Zielenzinger suggests, but will also recognize it as a courageous response.

The scope of this essay is to understand this desperate courage without pigeonholing the phenomena of hikikomori to particular cultural milieus. By utilizing a philosophical and existential approach, I will draw on the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' writings on the "Other," and on the theory of "unhomelikeness," developed by the Swedish bioethicist Fredrik Svenaeus in which he uses Heideggerian phenomenology in order to understand illness. Of course, the truth related to being homebound will be a multidisciplinary one. One cannot ignore the valuable contributions by psychiatrists, eminently among them Takahiro Kito and Alan Teo, who have recorded rich case studies regarding hikikomori in various countries, who invented the first assessment scale of hikikomori symptoms,[5] and who propose the most current diagnostic criteria for identifying hikikomori as follows:

(A) The person spends most of the day and nearly every day confined to home.

(B) Marked and persistent avoidance of social situations (e.g., attending school, working) and social relationships (e.g., friendships, contact with family members).

(C) The social withdrawal and avoidance interferes significantly with the person's normal routine, occupational (or academic) functioning, or social activities or relationships.

(D) The person perceives the withdrawal as ego-syntonic.

(E) In individuals under age 18 years, the duration is at least 6 months.[6]

(F) The social withdrawal and avoidance are not better accounted for by another mental disorder, such as Social Phobia (e.g., avoidance of social situations because of fear of embarrassment), Major Depressive Disorder (e.g., avoidance of social situations as a reflection of neurovegetative symptoms), Schizophrenia (e.g., isolation due to negative symptoms of psychosis), or Avoidant Personality Disorder (e.g., isolation due to fears of criticism or rejection).

Beyond psychiatric medicine, researchers in fields ranging from sociology, hematology, public health, to attachment theory, have addressed the phenomenology of hikikomori. These approaches have in common the assumption that social withdrawal is a sign of deficiency, of abnormal character, and of lack of health. Under this model, hikikomori are merely pulling away from others, from responsibility, and from the necessity of growing up. The analysis provided here rejects this interpretation of hikikomori and instead emphasizes a broader perspective that includes listening to the stories of hikikomori, one that treats social withdrawal as a willful action toward the fulfillment of a desire; one of which is the desire for solitude.

Solitude

People are not shy about solitude. In fact, a group of mostly American psychologists even wrote a 600-page handbook on solitude in 2014.[7] One could interpret

[4] Oxford English Dictionary, "hikikomori, n.," OED Online, Oxford University Press, June 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/276284. Accessed 6 July 2020.

[5] Alan R. Teo, Jason I. Chen, Hiroaki Kubo, Ryoko Katsuki, Mino Sato-Kasai, Norihiro Shimokawa, Kohei Hayakawa, Wakako Umene-Nakano, James E. Aikens, Shigenobu Kanba, and Takahiro Kato, "Development and validation of the 25-item Hikikomori Questionnaire (HQ-25)," *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 72/10 (June 2018), 780-788.

[6] Alan R. Teo and Albert C. Gaw, "Hikikomori, A Japanese Culture-Bound Syndrome of Social Withdrawal?: A Proposal for DSM-5," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 198/6 (June 2010), 444-449, here p. 447.

[7] Robert J. Coplan and Julie C. Bowker, eds., *The Handbook of Solitude: Psychological Perspectives on Social Isolation, Social Withdrawal, and Being Alone*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.

this turn toward redeeming solitude as a reaction to modern society's increasing struggle with hyper-connectivity and information overload. Yet, celebrating solitude seems to be as old as history itself. For instance, the archetypal hermit is indifferent but wise, a guide for knight-errants in medieval romances or, as in the case of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the philosophical saviors of decadent societies. Writers and artists have a particular reputation for transforming solitude into a glorious experience that produces creativity and self-knowledge. For example, Franz Kafka writes:

> It isn't necessary that you leave home. Sit at your desk and listen. Don't even listen, just wait. Don't wait, be still and alone. The whole world will offer itself to you to be unmasked, it can do no other, it will writhe before you in ecstasy.[8]

Here, Kafka's characterization of the world as being subservient yet joyful positions the solitude-is-good view in the context of an individual's relation with knowledge. Kenneth Rubin points out that there are good and bad kinds of alone time.[9] His provisos for the good and productive kind of alone time are that solitude be voluntary, balanced with access to social groups, emotionally regulated, and amenable to maintaining positive, supportive relationships with others. The productivity in question here could be described with an escape-valve-type model: all people in a society need some time for self-contemplation, self-exploration, and introspection. We all need rooms, tents, caves, and noise-cancelling headphones of our own. For capitalist societies to function, the most tired and burnt-out and disillusioned and dejected amongst us humans must have secluded spaces to retreat into, to find self-knowledge, in preparation for one's grand return to corporate life. As an example for the bad or destructive kind of solitude that is most ostensibly relevant to hikikomori, one can consider the plot in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, a novel that obsessively explores characters who are isolated from meaningful engagement with others.[10] Their solitude is never truly voluntary, as the majority of these characters are addicted to some object or activity, the most salient of which are drugs and digital entertainment. Here, the desire of solitude is absorption in a way that is beyond mental dependency and escapism, and that is profoundly physical. The body as a locus for competing addictions or compulsions must lock itself away from society to feel safe.

Nonetheless, Rubin's two instances of solitude have little to do with hikikomori. A more suitable understanding of this human condition is given by Emmanuel Levinas in *Time and the Other* wherein he shows that humans are concerned with "the ontological root of solitude."[11] That is, there is no value in determining whether solitude is a deficiency either in support of or in opposition to collectivism. Levinas addresses the ontological root of solitude with these eloquent words:

> It will not be a knowledge, because through knowledge, whether one wants it or not, the object is absorbed by the subject and duality disappears. It will not be an *ecstasis*, because in *ecstasis* the subject is absorbed in the object and recovers itself in its unity. All these relationships result in the disappearance of the other. [*LTO* 41]

When speaking of self-knowledge and *ecstasis*, this does not address being in solitude, rather it addresses going beyond solitude; threading frayed subject-subject relations with subject-object relations. The direction here is not toward a generalization of hikikomori but rather toward being actively concerned with the ontological root of solitude. Of course, the path to social withdrawal can be chosen for many reasons, resulting from many dispositions and many fears. Some hikikomori are attracted to solitude on grounds of its opportunities for gaining knowledge, such as Jun in *SOS* who gives up on studying for university entrance exams because of his desire to closely read the works of Immanuel Kant. A glance at case reports in the literature portrays a group of intelligent people who are articulate about their situation and their reasons for withdrawal. Some spend their night-days immersed in the Internet or they are absorbed by gaming, and some dedicate their time to

[8] Franz Kafka, *The Zurau Aphorisms*, transl. Michael Hofmann and Geoffrey Brock, New York, NY: Schocken 2006, p. 108.

[9] Kenneth H. Rubin, "Foreword: On Solitude, Withdrawal, and Social Isolation," in *The Handbook of Solitude: Psychological Perspectives on Social Isolation, Social Withdrawal, and Being Alone*, eds. Robert J. Coplan and Julie C. Bowker, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell 2014, pp. xii-xviii, here p. xv.

[10] David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 1996.

[11] Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, transl. Richard A. Cohen, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press 1987, p. 41. [Henceforth cited as *LTO*]

reading books. Some spend their time staring at walls. My aim here is presenting neither an ethnography of hikikomori nor a psychological theory. Instead, the objective is to comprehend what happens to the body and mind after six months or longer of being largely alone at home. Irrespective of whether the choice for solitude is involuntary, there must be a perceived value in one's longing for solitude in addition to the apparent reason of having been hurt by the outside world.

Time

Living the same night-day ad infinitum in the secure space of a bedroom is somehow similar to stopping time. This point was made tacitly by the title of psychiatrist Tamaki Saitō's book, *Hikikomori: Adolescence without End*, the 1998 bestseller that originally introduced the world to the word hikikomori.[12] This oftentimes invisible bond between solitude and time hints at what exactly is so radical about hikikomori. It goes beyond, or possibly prior to, the need for knowledge or ecstasis. It moves toward solitude, in Levinas' words, as "a category of being" (*LTO* 39). Solitude when seen in this light becomes extraordinary and profoundly existential for it implies a control, or even a mastery over existence. No longer merely in a state of just "despair and...abandonment," hikikomori find a place where they can have courage, what Levinas would have called "a virility, a pride and a sovereignty" (*LTO* 54). This is a courage that the capitalist world has beaten out of them either through negative judgment, prejudice, or outright bullying. The bedroom becomes a counterforce of near-total ipseity, an obscure philosophical word that describes a virtual world devoid of the discomforting influence of others on an individual's identity. In his work *Existence and Existents*, Levinas offers the helpful French phrase *il y a* (there is), to label this fundamental mood of beings, or "existents", when experiencing the proverbial nothing of existence in near-total ipseity.[13] In this space, there is no this or that, just a "universal absence [that is] a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence" (*LEE* 55). In the hikikomori bedroom, all other beings dissipate under a cloud of *il y a* darkness. The alleged catch phrase of hikikomori, when responding to investigator questions, is "I don't know." In this permanent dark night of the soul, in which they hide from the uncertainty of the outside within the straightforward cause-and-effect logic of the inside, existents can make life about the one "intransitive element" that they have mastery over, that no other can ever understand: the work of existing. This is the "interior relationship par excellence" (*LTO* 42), which is Levinas' way of saying that this solitude is so far inward that one just is. And in a sense, this monadic relationship is not something that existents go looking for in subjectivity, but return to it. Levinas writes, "It is by existing that I am without windows and doors" (*LTO* 42). The existent is at home. Through radical social withdrawal, hikikomori summon the apocalypse and are the last people on Earth. No one to listen to, to take heat from; there is no past and no future other than the individual's own.

This is the Kafkaesque, anarchic "silent world" that Levinas develops in his opus *Totality and Infinity*.[14] The individual comes as close as possible to being an existent separated from being-with-others, no longer participating in meaningful dialogue with even the most kind-hearted of interlocutors, such as, for example, a parent. "I don't know" is the extent of permissible vulnerability. The individual becomes "unconcerned with its justification" (*LTI* 90) and becomes heartbreakingly ambivalent toward every other individual. The outside world becomes a grand spectacle of miserable and frustrated adults suffocating under the shroud of cynicism and disappointed dreams. In the very modern quest for uprooting hikikomori from seclusion and thus allegedly curing them, onlookers nudge uncomfortably close to the possibility that the silent world is a theatre from which the so-perceived adult world is quietly laughed at. The finger-pointing mechanism of diagnosing illness in hikikomori comes into question, and philosophers tend to say the word "suffering" under their breath. Zielenziger describes his own doubt and devastation when he reflects on a testimony by Kenji, a 34-year old hikikomori who observes that he could think of no adults in his life that grew up free in order to

[12] Saitō Tamaki, *Hikikomori: Adolescence without End*, transl. Jeffrey Angles, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

[13] Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence & Existents*, transl. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2001. [Henceforth cited as *LEE*]

[14] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, transl. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2001. [Henceforth cited as *LTI*]

become what they wanted. Zielenziger writes: "I can think of no more gloomy diagnosis of a modern people" (*SOS* 297). In a horrifyingly perverse way, this mode of being moves in a similar vein as Levinas' immortal search for an ethics as first philosophy. By paring away the contingencies of unequal financial opportunities, unfair social situations, corrupted systems of morality, and the ineluctable frustrations of human society in general, is in a way to look for a primordial and raw notion of truth and justice. Through the sheer fact of being, the stone-cold master of existence becomes royalty in the silent world. Life proceeds in an orderly and predictable fashion. Eating and sleeping are no longer indulgences, but meager ways of surviving. Video games allow access to virtual lands where hard work and sincere commitment is proportionately rewarded with levels, upgrades, and new abilities. Internet anonymity and passive media consumption writ large allow for pseudo-contact with others without necessarily implicating oneself in real relationships. These are worrisome twists on Levinas' conception of nourishment, which he describes as "the transmutation of the other into the same, which is the essence of enjoyment" (*LTI* 111). The enjoyment for hikikomori is a hyper-real relationship with virtual others from a vast distance, "approach[ing] without touching" (*LTI* 109). Although this is not what Levinas intended at all, it is the hikikomori way of balancing self-nourishment with the infinite quality that should be part and parcel of ethics. Signing off from the dull absurdity of the adult world, hikikomori become the center of a story with endless restarts, a tale with magic and wonder as givens. Heroism comes with an online walkthrough. The terror and domination of one's desires are being overthrown.

Home

The metaphorical meanings of the human heart are numerous. They are being represented in the timeless muse of art, literature, music, and religion. The heart is seen as the seat of the deepest emotions: joy, grief, and of course love. The phrase "learning by heart" captures the heart's role for holding on to memories, as being a book of the soul. Paintings of St. Augustine often have the philosopher sitting at his desk before an open book clutching a pen in one hand and his heart in the other. In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the heart refers to the center of existence. From eighteen to twenty-one days after conception, the heart beats in a steady rhythm that has become synonymous with life itself. For example, author Annie Dillard observes,

> if you sit absolutely perfectly balanced on the end of your spine, with your legs either crossed tailor-fashion or drawn up together, and your arms forward on your legs, then even if you hold your breath, your body will rock with the energy of your heartbeat, forward and back, effortlessly, for as long as you want to remain balanced.[15]

Sadly, to be so endlessly meaningful also means to be endlessly mockable. Its sickeningly sweet epithets—broken-hearted, light-hearted, heavy-hearted, cold-hearted, down-hearted, kind-hearted, big-hearted, soft-hearted, hard-hearted, good-hearted—are worn on the sleeve or stuck in the throat or melted on the ground of sensitive people. These epithets have rendered the organ and its musers into a silly cartoon. This cynicism about the heart and what it represents casts a shadow on the very human desire for symbols and for meaning. And in physiologic terms, this is what the heart does for us: It pumps nutrient-rich blood to the farthest reaches of the body, infusing the entire multi-track network of arteries and capillaries and veins with nourishment. To abandon the heart with a knowing sneer is therefore to abandon phenomenology's orientation toward the meaning of lived experience. Likewise, to give a purely negative account of hikikomori is to deny to them the humanity that they are trying to preserve in a society that exiles perceived failures to its periphery. In my opinion, the failure of many researchers to understand the global presence of hikikomori is partly due to their reluctance to acknowledge the hearts and the desires within socially withdrawn people.

The favored humanistic approach in this essay starts by considering these clichés, such as, for example, "home is where the heart is." Taken at face value there is something powerfully relevant and eye opening about the idea that the heart, if one is to take it as a center of meaning, is fundamentally domestic. It is instinctively recognizable that the dyad arises between the heart and what houses the heart: which is, the lived body. This most primal of primal subject-object relationships begs the question of the phenomenological status of the socially withdrawn body, if one were to maintain that hikikomori are not just empty husks but people who actively seek meaning in life. In order to address this premise, it is necessary to challenge the presupposition

[15] Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, New York, NY: Harper Perennial 2013, p. 126.

that hikikomori are ill. To speak of illness is to return to otherness, but otherness of one's body instead of the otherness of others. We find in illness the flipside of domesticity, what Fredrik Svenaeus elegantly refers to as unhomelikeness in his unorthodox Heideggerian analysis of medical phenomenology.[16] Svenaeus takes serious Martin Heidegger's seminal argument that meaning is an intrinsic property of beings-in-the-world, that as beings humans are understanding animals. As beings thrust into a particular world with established patterns of meaningfulness and cultural memory, one's orientation toward otherness is a closely related function of one's understanding of that particular world, sometimes in philosophy called the life-world. Svenaeus says it better:

> To be delivered to the world of intersubjective meaning—language, culture, history etc.—is to find oneself in the world (*sich befinden*), and this finding oneself appears in the form of an attuned understanding, in the form of finding oneself in a mood. Our attunement colours and determines our understanding of the world.[17]

The implication for medicine then is that health is not just the feeling of wellbeing or fitness or the absence of concerning symptoms, but it is a type of attunement. This concept carries large significance to phenomenologists. At a basic level, to be attuned means to be so with the world that you barely notice it. One might think of a middle school symphonic band once in a while playing in tune. In those moments of attunement, the band becomes a whole and one can relax in the seat. However, when the oboes are too sharp or the trombones too aggressively loud, the music comes apart and the disturbance becomes a glaring mark on the evening. This is how Svenaeus conceives of health as homelike attunement, a rhythm as constant and reliable as the beating of the heart.

This is also the provocation found in Hans-Georg Gadamer's book *The Enigma of Health*, that health's role in balancing our being-in-the-world is precisely the reason why it is so hard to grasp until illness robs one of it.[18] Ontologically speaking, being healthy is being home. Homey environments are familiar in their boring everydayness. Action is easy and automatic, without the friction of conflict, angst, or self-doubt. On the one hand, homes are known in nook-and-cranny level detail, even to the point that its inhabitants navigate its rooms in the dark. On the other hand, unhomelike illness is when the roof of one's home is exposed by a passing hurricane or the paranoia of curious and judgmental neighbors. Illness, like the sharp oboe or the aggressive trombone, is thus analogous to the foghorn of otherness. It reminds people that they are not alone, that in the clouds floats a stormy, hidden superstructure of rules and contingencies, a violent something that resists certainty and therefore mastery. In illness, this is the otherness of the body enveloped within a society, a world within worlds, where one must be doubly responsible for both the body's call of embodiment and society's judgments. It is not difficult to see the appeal of staying home for eternity. Attunement is simple to maintain when the silent world a person inhabits comes from within that person. This silent world is not an immature escape from society, but a sincere alternative universe of what society could be like, a world where people do not have to hide their feelings to succeed. If one presupposes that hikikomori is an illness, and I find this presupposition to be bold, one must be open to hearing the unhomelike etiology coming from both body and society. Scholars are responsible for listening to the other side of this story; they are obligated to hear just how bad things are.

Conclusion

The consideration of responsibility makes concluding this essay a painfully naive act. In writing this essay I have relied on metaphors, allegedly relevant references and quotations, self-serving linguistic manipulations, and theory-laden concepts such as phenomenology. It goes without saying that my subjectivity shapes the narrative. By sharing what I know about hikikomori I intended to bring into relief the particularity of their experiences. In Levinas' terms, by formulating and communicating the overall experiences of hikikomori I generalized and made claim to their stories. By doing

[16] Fredrik Svenaeus, "Illness as Unhomelike Being-in-the-World: Heidegger and the Phenomenology of Medicine," *Medicine, Health Care, and Philosophy* 14/3 (August 2011), 333-343.

[17] Fredrik Svenaeus, *The Hermeneutics of Medicine and the Phenomenology of Health: Steps Towards a Philosophy of Medical Practice*, Dordrecht, NL: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000, p. 92.

[18] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age*, transl. Jason Gaiger and Nicholas Walker, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996.

so, I might have given the impression that the stories people are unable to express must be simple stories because the people themselves are simple. This has not been my intention. Imagination is dangerous. It can reveal urgent social realities that are in urgent need of consideration, but it can also create false feelings of mastery and individuality when face-to-face with darkness.

If this essay has done anything, it has proved that its author is inadequate. I did not, and will never come close to understanding the "desperate courage" that I doled out to hikikomori. However, as disingenuous as this sounds, I cannot help but feel pulled into these people. Of course, this pull is a function of recognition, of feeling the unhomelikeness and the desire for social withdrawal within my own psyche. Yet, I also have the understanding that this pull is what responsibility truly is. If the equally inadequate Zielenziger has shown me anything, it is that the silent worlds of hikikomori are not that silent. I know this not as just a consumer of hikikomori interviews, documentaries, and testimonies. I know this as someone who, as a medical student, is pulled by the desire to live for others. I cannot see others as being simply voids that I will fill. All others are the infinitely complex culmination of feelings, philosophical and scientific thought, cultural machinations, biological instincts, and imaginative intimations. To exist for others means for me that I try to listen to the voice of others without narrowing the distance to them exaggeratedly. A society that values responsibility is a society that makes room for those who are either born into or wander into that society's periphery. Anyone living through the COVID-19 pandemic has some sense of the unhomelikeness that hikikomori feel in public. However, hikikomori do not withdraw from a disease, but from society. Understanding the existential condition of hikikomori is not necessarily concerned with cures, with making reconnections, but with changing the vastly paranoid world that they are responding to. A society with an ethics of care gives everyone a chance to feel at home. This is not something that is taught, but something that others can help to bring out in oneself.