

The Need for Philosophy in Times of Trauma

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When we began the work for this special issue on philosophy and trauma, we of course had no idea how timely it would become by the date of publication. But over the last nine months, as the COVID-19 pandemic has forced a new reality on people all over the world, the focus on trauma that this issue presents has taken on new urgency. Philosophy, in a time of pandemic, must surely turn its attention and its formidable abilities to helping us all understand trauma.

I have, for many years, seen trauma as a frequent “elephant-in-the-room,” one of those features of life that we do not wish to strengthen by acknowledging its presence. Many people try to shun that elephant, averting their eyes and covering their ears, because the pain of it is not what anyone wants, and the effort of responding to it seems more than what many are willing to bear. Unfortunately, ignoring trauma does not make it go away. On the contrary, ignoring trauma tends to allow it to become more entrenched, which is not what we want. As difficult as it may be, our best response to trauma is to recognize it. This may mean different things, depending on our skills, abilities, strengths, and relationships to the trauma. As individual persons, it may mean simply offering a compassionate response. As philosophers, it may mean engaging with others in ongoing research and scholarly efforts to better understand trauma and how it affects human experiences.

Just over a year ago, with the support of the Philosophy Department and various other entities at the University of North Carolina Asheville, I was able to host a conference called “Philosophical Engagements with Trauma.” I believe it was the first conference in the United States to be entirely devoted to a philosophical focus on analyses of trauma and traumatic experiences, and it seemed to me to be long

overdue. This special issue grew out of that conference in recognition that the work done there needs to continue and that trauma as a matter for *philosophical* analysis needs to be brought to wider attention in the discipline, as well as to broader discussions. The conference topics ranged from issues in defining trauma to issues in trauma treatment and everything in between. Participants spent two very long and intense days sharing ideas and experiences, and the consensus was that this opportunity to explore trauma together, as philosophers, was both timely and important for at least two reasons. The first is that trauma studies, as an emerging interdisciplinary field, needs philosophy—it needs the skills and insights that philosophers can bring to bear in helping to develop and make sense of debates, controversies, and themes in the field. The second is that philosophy needs to learn about trauma; that is, that philosophy has not given enough attention to the vast range of human experience and human reality that is affected by trauma, and that is to philosophy’s detriment.

Trauma-producing events or stimuli are ubiquitous; the National Council for Behavioral Health estimates that 70 percent of adults in the United States have experienced such events in their lives and that over 90 percent of clients in public behavioral health have experienced trauma.¹ But such events are also of many kinds (and may not even be “events” strictly speaking): traumatic effects can be produced by causes or conditions ranging from natural disasters to human-caused violence. Not all persons who experience events or conditions that are capable of producing trauma are actually traumatized; trauma is a matter of how persons perceive and respond to those

1. “How to Manage Trauma,” *The National Council for Behavioral Health*, May 2013, <https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Trauma-infographic.pdf?daf=375ateTbd56>.

events and of their resilience and the support they get after or while it happens. Trauma can be produced by a range of causes or events that affect people individually but also by the “mundane” and ongoing violence of social oppressions and injustices like those experienced by people through racism, sexism, and poverty.

The point to all this is that there is enough trauma in enough people's lives that we as philosophers need to recognize it as a phenomenon that demands our attention. It appears to be part of the human condition, and as such, it should be an area of philosophical investigation. I take it as relatively uncontroversial that a goal of philosophy is to extend knowledge and understanding of human experiences and the relationships between humans and the world or being in general; if that is correct, and large percentages of persons experience trauma, then philosophers have a responsibility to work at understanding how trauma affects humans and their being in the world.

This is more the case now than ever, given that the pandemic is already affecting people all over the world through the grief of sudden and unexpected loss, and through the helplessness of seeing loved ones become terribly ill and dying, without even being able to stay by their sides to offer loving witness, comfort, and support. But even without these worst possible circumstances, millions of people are experiencing as traumatic the fear and uncertainty that the pandemic has created, the instability of job and income loss, of being unable to maintain their homes and feed their families—assuming that these things are still fears for them and have not yet become their reality. On top of effects directly caused by or related to the pandemic are those conflicts and instabilities that already existed by are now being “spotlighted” and/or exacerbated by the conditions the pandemic contributes to: the injustices of racial disparities in health care, economic and social conditions, and political violence being primary among them. As if that were not enough, we are experiencing what feels like a new low in political divisiveness in our country, with polarization that is clearly fueled by fear as our political leaders reveal that they are much more concerned with their own stock market earnings than with the well-being of their constituents, and even encouraging vi-

olence and hate against anyone who disagrees with them. Who could feel secure in the midst of all this, besides, perhaps, the proverbial 1 percent? And of course, this is the experience mainly of those who have felt relatively secure heretofore; for those whose experiences have already been riddled with violence, pain, and insecurity, which so many people live with around the globe, the pandemic is adding to that already overwhelming burden. In so many ways, we are seeing that our current conditions are prime for the creation of new trauma and for the intensification of already existing, ongoing traumas.²

This issue, then, is a contribution to the philosophical literature on trauma, and though it is not in general directly speaking to the conditions of the pandemic (with the exception of Wilkerson's piece), we hope that it will be useful in the ways that it does engage with trauma. There is, of course, excellent and important work already in what I would call philosophy of trauma, and more is being done all the time. Susan Brison's *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* is one example, and Karyn Freedman's article “The Epistemological Significance of Psychic Trauma” is another, of the texts that I have used as references in my own work. Already in the *Philosopher's Index* there is a significant increase in the number of entries one finds by searching simply under “trauma” as compared to five years ago. But given the relative level of trauma that exists, it seems to me a topic that remains under-examined by philosophers. In the same way that we have particular skills and insights that we can bring to bear on other topics and issues, I believe that a better understanding of trauma can be achieved if more philosophers put their talents to work in this area. This is why, of course, I am so thrilled to have been involved in bringing this issue to fruition.

But often we have more than a professional interest in trauma; many of us come to the investigation of it through our own personal ex-

2. See Michael J. Salas, “The COVID-19 Crisis Is a Trauma Pandemic in the Making,” *Psych Central*, April 9, 2020, <https://psychcentral.com/blog/the-covid-19-crisis-is-a-trauma-pandemic-in-the-making/>; Danny Horesh and Adam D. Brown, “Traumatic Stress in the Age of COVID-19: A Call to Close Critical Gaps and Adapt to New Realities,” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 12, no. 4 (2020): 331-32, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tra0000592>.

periences. Philosophers are no more immune to traumatic experience than the general population, and so we should expect that many of us have had trauma in our own lives or in the lives of those close to us. In my own case, my initiation into trauma studies came mostly as a result of the revelation of the trauma of my adopted children. I believed that I could not help or support them without understanding their experiences as much as possible, and how they had affected them and their perception of the world.³ The more I learned, the more convinced I became that this was indeed a field of investigation that needs philosophy, and to which philosophy needs to attend.

As a brief example, I found that learning about childhood responses to (severe and prolonged) trauma raises important questions about the meaning of rationality. Some behaviors of traumatized children look decidedly irrational from the traditional standpoint of presumed objectivity; if one says “action A is prohibited, so if you do action A, then consequence B will follow, and you will not like that” it seems perfectly rational that a child will (once they get the hang of it) try to avoid that sequence of events. But a child who has been traumatized may not follow this rational pattern, which of course looks irrational if we do not know that they are responding to a different set of concerns or needs. A child who has been abused may perceive the laying down of the rule as a prelude to an abusive episode, which they cannot avoid (because children cannot prevent adults from abusing them). Since they cannot avoid it, they know it is coming, and at some point the anxiety of knowing that it is coming may be more difficult to bear than the abuse itself. So, they may deliberately act in the way that triggers the consequence, because controlling when it comes is better than simply waiting for it. Thus they very rationally exercise the little agency they have over the situation, controlling the timing of it since they cannot control anything more. This does not make rationality simply a matter of perception, but I hope it does point out that our ability to perceive the rationality of an action or choice depends on our ability to understand the world and experiences that lead to it.

3. Melissa Burchard, *Philosophical Reflections on Mothering in Trauma* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

As the articles that follow argue in many different ways, being traumatized changes (or forms) one’s understanding of both self and world, but it would be a mistake to assume that that changed understanding is simply wrong or deluded. We should, instead, assume that it provides us with another important view of the world—it helps us see, among other things, what the world looks like when one is under significant threat and helps us understand how people are likely to act, what will be rational, when one is under significant threat. This, I would argue, is becoming increasingly important as various regions in the world experience various threats (of war, for example), various groups of people experience threats (violent racism and homophobia, for example) and especially as the world as a whole undergoes periods of threat, as we are in the current pandemic. This is not by way of excusing any behaviors but rather about making them intelligible so that we can respond to them appropriately. Again, if we do not understand a problem, we are unlikely to be able to imagine how to make it better.

If trauma is a part of the human condition, in whatever ways and on whatever level, that might leave us feeling hopeless. But the authors of the articles in this issue do not seem to be moving in that direction. Instead, they use their experiences of trauma together with their talents for philosophical thinking to show us pathways to greater understanding and even healing. To me, this is philosophy at its best, and I am very happy to have been involved in the project of this special issue.

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