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Bodily Harm: An Analysis of the Phenomenological and Linguistic Aspects of Harm and Trauma

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Bodily Harm: An Analysis of the Phenomenological and Linguistic Aspects of Harm and
Trauma

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my father, Randy Peeler, who passed away shortly after my entrance into the graduate program at the University of South Florida in 2018. He graduated from USF as a member of the class of 1977 and remained an outspoken Bulls fan for all his life.

He is dearly missed.

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ABSTRACT

This work seeks to explore the phenomenological experience of harm through an investigation of trauma and its existential features. Harm, despite its importance for many topics in both Political Science and Political Theory, is not often investigated as a subject in itself. By interrogating elements of Merleau-Ponty's uniquely embodied philosophy, this work seeks to further our understanding of harm as a phenomenon which is both uniquely subjective and yet socially informed.

The text is split into two halves – with the first offering an exegesis of relevant sections of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception, and the second engaging with contemporary secondary literature on topics of harm, pain, and trauma in order to establish which aspects of harm may be better understood through an analysis rooted in embodied existential philosophy. Of particular interest throughout this paper will be the role of language as a means of both taking up and expressing the world in an existential sense, as well as the ways in which our relationship to language and trauma are simultaneously individuating and yet inexorably tied to our everyday social relations.

PREFACE

Harm features regularly in politics – both as an often-necessary consequence of the deployment of power, and as an end to which policy seeks to avoid, mitigate, or distribute. Who can be harmed, who can't be harmed, who should be harmed – all of these inform discussions of rights and ethics as well as form the boundaries between the normative exercise of political theorizing and applied praxis. Any political action whatsoever carries with it a dual possibility of harm – who will be negatively affected directly by this particular exercise of power, and who will be negatively affected by the decision to take this course of action instead of another? Harm is the obverse of power, it sits beneath the exercise of power, dwelling in the space between decision and alternative. A proper grasp of harm is critical to fully understand broader notions of power.

How do we understand and respond to harm in an embodied sense? This thesis will explore questions of trauma as a specific type of harm through the lens of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, showing how it pulls us from our everyday relationship with our world and forces us to adapt and reconceive of ourselves in new terms after a traumatic event. The first chapter, "Body", will provide an overview of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in regard to the basic mechanics of the body schema and intentional arc, building to a discussion of language as a means by which we can interpret and know ourselves and our culture. The second chapter, "Trauma", focuses on how we experience harm and how it affects us in an existential sense –

complicating and problematizing our everyday relationship by creating an obtrusive experience of harm which prevents us from smoothly re-entering life after trauma. This chapter will culminate in the concept of ‘narrativization’, the means by which we may heal from a trauma by re-contextualizing the event and re-inventing our own relationship to our world.

CHAPTER ONE: BODY

Introduction

Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* establishes an ontology centered around the body and its relationship to the world. In this chapter, I will outline some of the key concepts in that work in order to lay a groundwork for more specific discussions of the body as it relates to questions of harm, as well as to properly prepare for an engagement with secondary literature that draws from Merleau-Ponty's philosophy later in the text. Of particular interest will be his concepts of the 'body schema' and 'intentional arc', which inform how our body finds our mode of experience in everyday life, as well as a discussion of how Merleau-Ponty conceives of language in his system of thought.

The first section of this chapter will deal with the body schema – Merleau-Ponty's conception of how our body relates to the world through abilities and capacities. This will broaden into an investigation of the intentional arc, a concept which encompasses why and how we have the ability to experience certain situations which are suffused with thematic meaning separate from their objective contents. This concept will be discussed through Merleau-Ponty's example of sexuality as a mode in which the intentional arc may reveal some situations as 'erotic' irrespective of their contents. The discussion of sexuality as a means of disclosing experience will lead into an analysis of Merleau-Ponty's views on language – as well as how

language can disclose experience and influence how we take up a situation. The final section of this chapter will discuss how language may act as a means of differentiation, individuating because of its nature as a means of taking up and understanding the world.

In regard to our core investigation of harm, these sections will first establish the body and its capacities so as to show how they might suffer existential forms of injury. The latter half of this chapter and its discussion of language will also set up how harm, as well as such harm's causes and effects, are understood through language. These topics will then receive more specific treatment in the second chapter.

The Body Schema

The first chapter of Merleau-Ponty's work lays out the means by which the body relates to the world, starting with the idea of a body schema and culminating in the concept of the "intentional arc." Our relationship to our body is not one of possession, as is implied by Descartes' Cogito; while we 'have' a body as expressed in the common turn of phrase, we do not relate to our body as we would an inanimate possession. We have, for instance, books and computers and clothes and tools, but the way in which we have a body does not conform to a tidy internal-external separation as do those miscellanea. This becomes apparent when we reflect upon perception: the way in which we perceive the state of those objects is different than the way in which we perceive our own body. Even further, Merleau-Ponty argues that the kind of spatiality possessed by those objects is different in character than the kind in which we understand and situate our own bodies. As Merleau-Ponty notes:

The contour of my body is a border that ordinary spatial relations do not cross. This is because the body's parts relate to each other in a peculiar way: they are not laid out side by side, but rather envelop each other. My hand, for example, is not a

collection of points...I hold my body as an indivisible possession and I know the position of each of my limbs through a *body schema* [*un schema corporel*]¹

The radical nature of this concept is not readily apparent. The body schema is a spatiality characterized neither by any amount of internal, sensory information nor by empirical, kinesthetic knowledge; it is instead contingent upon the specific task and situation with which the body engages. In Merleau-Ponty's words: "...my body's spatiality is not, like the spatiality of external objects or of "spatial sensations," a *positional spatiality*; rather, it is a *situational spatiality*."² He offers the example of leaning against a table with our hands firmly planted on its surface, comparing it to the motion of a comet: our hands become the center of our attention as our legs trail off behind us. Another example is given: when holding a pipe we 'know' where both the pipe and our hand is at all times, since our bodily positioning is bound up in our action with that object. This notion is most clearly articulated by Merleau-Ponty when he writes:

If my body can ultimately be a "form," and if there can be, in front of it, privileged figures against indifferent backgrounds, this is insofar as my body is polarized by its tasks, insofar as it *exists toward* them, insofar as it coils up upon itself in order to reach its goal, and the "body schema" is, in the end, a manner of expressing that my body is in and towards the world.³

This is similar to Heidegger's notion of 'world,' which is not merely an external assemblage of objects, but rather, a seemingly endless field of potential co-relations to which we are inseparably enmeshed. The body is called towards the world and its condition and notion of space is informed by the specific nature of its engagement with the world.

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Donald A. Landes, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2012), pp 100.

² *Ibid*, 102.

³ *Ibid*, 103.

In regard to our discussion of harm, it is important to distinguish Descartes' separation of mind and body from Merleau-Ponty's richer understanding of the body as a way of being in the world. If Descartes' separation held true, bodily harm could be reducible to a type of extreme negative qualia but should not, in theory, be able to fundamentally alter our existential mode of being. Damage to the body, being separate from the mind, could only harm the mind by way of our cognitive perception of injury. Merleau-Ponty affords a richer notion of harm by way of his richer notion of the body – if our way of being in the world is damaged, we are harmed in a more profound way.

The Intentional Arc

Throughout *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty engages with the field of clinical psychology, especially as a means of highlighting those cases where traditional attempts from the 'hard' and 'soft' wings of the medical sciences have failed to provide sufficient insight into abnormal cases. One such example is that of a patient called "Schneider." To offer a truncated version of Merleau-Ponty's description: Schneider is one of the class of patients who has significant trouble performing "abstract" movements. If asked to move a part of the body in a specific manner, such as moving one's hand counter-clockwise or touching the tip of the nose with a specified finger, he is often unable to complete such requests, or does so with the greatest difficulty. (These movements are "abstract" as they do not relate to a specific lived situation, but instead, are something of a theoretical or conceptual movement outside of any meaningful context. Additionally, they pre-suppose a particular command of one's body which, in Schneider's case, is not present.) In contrast to such difficulties with "abstract" movements, however, Schneider is quite capable of completing "concrete" movements, such as when he "takes his handkerchief from his pocket and blows his nose, or takes a match from a matchbox

and lights a lamp...He can even, without any preparatory movements, execute these “concrete” movements on command”.⁴ (These movements are “concrete” as they are rooted in specific lived situations familiar to the person performing them.)⁵

By Merleau-Ponty’s logic, the illness does not involve any purely physical incapacitations – it does not hamper the operation of his body in terms of physical ability, his muscles and bones are clearly quite capable of moving and gesticulating for certain tasks. It also seems doubtful it is a purely psychological quirk, since the degree to which Schneider is incapacitated rests entirely with his contextualized relationship to his surroundings.⁶ This is surmised when Merleau-Ponty notes:

The structure “world,” with its double moment of sedimentation and spontaneity, is at the center of consciousness, and it is through a certain leveling out of the “world” that we will be able to understand Schneider’s intellectual, perceptual, and motor disorders simultaneously and without thereby reducing them to each other.⁷

Schneider’s disorder is rooted neither in his ability to move, nor sense, nor think (in terms of traditional intellectual capacity). Instead, it is an *existential* disorder which impairs his ability to relate to the world in an unobtrusive and natural way. Schneider’s life is one of anti-spontaneity – his surroundings only become apparent to him when he consciously directs himself towards specific tasks or goal. He is not influenced by the world around him in the same way we might be. If he were to pass by a new store on his daily commute, he wouldn’t find himself pulled by the novelty of the wares in the window, nor the excitement of a foppish purchase. If we were to

⁴ Ibid, 105.

⁵ “The distinction between abstract movement and concrete movement is thereby clarified: the background of concrete movement is the world, the background of abstract movement is, on the contrary, constructed.” Ibid, 113.

⁶ For the sake of time, I gloss over a great deal of Merleau-Ponty’s specific clinical reasoning that is present in the text.

⁷ Ibid, 132.

imagine him commuting by plane, we would not expect him to be magnetically drawn to the view from the window in flight. He would not have, as we do, the sense of a multitude of different thematic influences contributing to a single complex and rich experience of world. (Consider, as just one example, the feeling around a major holiday such as Christmas or Halloween where everything – even errands or personal enjoyments and troubles – takes on some proportion of an uncanny “holiday” flavor.)

This existential faculty, whose deficiency is the cause of Schneider’s symptoms, is termed by Merleau-Ponty as the ‘Intentional Arc.’ As he explains:

...the life of consciousness – epistemic life, the life of desire, or perceptual life – is underpinned by an “intentional arc” that projects around us our past, our future, our human milieu, our physical situation, our ideological situation, and our moral situation, or rather, that ensures we are situated within all of these relationships. This intentional arc creates the unity of the senses, the unity of the senses with intelligence, and the unity of sensitivity and motricity. And this is what “goes limp” in the disorder.⁸

In comparison to Heidegger’s notion of ‘care’, we might say that the intentional arc is the capacity and specificity of existential care as manifested through our embodied consciousness – including all of our social and biological factors which differentiate us the Cartesian notion of a ‘pure consciousness’ or ‘pure mind’. Put another way, the intentional arc is what enables us to engage with the world, and what allows us to understand our possible actions in relation to the world.

The unified existential nature of the intentional arc also underpins our motricity (or our capacity to orient and move ourselves in the world). Our motor functions are not discrete steps sent from an all-computing transcendent mind, but rather they too exist in an existential field

⁸ Ibid, 137.

which projects possibilities and modes of engagement. This is highlighted by Merleau-Ponty when he writes:

For us to be able to move our body toward an object, the object must first exist for it, and hence our body must not belong to the region of the “in-itself.” Objects no longer exist for the arm of the person suffering from apraxia [abnormal or impaired movement], and this is what renders his arm immobile.⁹

This quote again illustrates the radical notion of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy: how could an object belong to an arm? Yet this notion is borne out by our own experience. The act of catching a ball thrown at us is not an intellectual event – it is reflexive, and our physical (as opposed to cognitive) capacities are what drive this reflex. There is, so to speak, a world for the hand.

Tying this section back to our discussion of harm, we see that the notion of an intentional arc fleshes out our embodied existence – we have at this point definitively moved away from the cartesian outlook of mind as separate from body. Furthermore, we may now see how harm can cause not just the negative qualia of pain or discomfort, but might also affect our relationship to the world through an effect on our capacity for experience and by altering our mode of experience. This concept of the intentional arc will also be referenced in the second chapter, “Harm”, when speaking of how trauma can interrupt our unobtrusive engagement with the world.

Sexuality and the Intentional Arc

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of sexuality explicates the way the body enables and sustains types of experience. In addition to his other ailments, the unlucky Schneider also suffers from what might be diplomatically be called ‘sexual inertia’ – he has almost no sexual drive

⁹ Ibid, 140.

whatsoever. This, too, is a product of his diminished intentional arc, manifesting as an inability to project himself into sexual situations. If we follow Merleau-Ponty in investigating the structure of sexuality from its existential standpoint to its expression, we will have a better sense as to why.

What qualities make sexuality particularly important for understanding the intentional arc? Sexuality has a privileged relationship to perception and representation – for the sexually stimulating object, event, or person can be both perceived and comprehended in a completely non-sexual context. There is no ‘objectively sexual’ object or situation as sexuality, like motricity, is a means of relating to the world in a particular way. This is elaborated by Merleau-Ponty when he writes:

There must be an immanent function in sexual life that guarantees its unfolding, and the normal extension of sexuality must rest upon the internal powers of the organic subject. There must be an Eros or a Libido that animates an original world, gives external stimuli a sexual value or signification, and sketches out for each subject the use to which he will put his objective body. For Schneider, it is the very structure of erotic perception or experience that is altered.¹⁰

There is not a relation of subject and object in the case of sexuality, or of a bare internal-external divide, but rather an embodied, organic, and categorically present yet individually varied sexual field. The ‘objective object’ suspended from context does not arrive into pure consciousness through a ‘clean intentionality’, but rather is made conspicuous or intrusive according to the forces at play in the body. This is emphasized when Merleau-Ponty says:

Erotic perception is not a *cogitato* that intends a *cogitatum*; through one body it aims at another body, and it is accomplished in the world, not within consciousness. For me, a scene does not have a sexual signification when I imagine, even confusedly, its possible relation to my sexual organs or to my states

¹⁰ Ibid, 158.

of pleasure, but rather when it exists for my body, for this always ready power of tying together the given stimuli into an erotic situation and for adapting a sexual behavior to it.¹¹

Sexuality does not reside within the observed object, or come about spontaneously from a consciousness, but is instead a particular way of relating to the world which we are existentially called to, provided we have such a capacity. Schneider, lacking this capability, does not encounter sexuality in the world, and as such, does not experience the world as a place where arousal or intimate interpersonal relations are possibilities that call out to him.¹² This is the crystallization of the existential principle which sexuality reveals: bodily capacity for a mode of relation to the world draws us towards that mode of relation, and situates our experience in terms of that relation. This notion of capacity as enabling experience will be directly discussed in the following chapter, where it will form a key component of the definition of trauma – that specific sort of harm hampers our bodily capacity for engagement, and in doing so, limits the quality and scope of our engagement with the world.

Sexuality shows most clearly how our relationship to the world can alter our experience of it – but language is the most pervasive and consequential way we come to understand and relate to our surroundings and involvements, as well as ourselves. Understanding Merleau-Ponty's view of language will let us grasp the collective, social aspects of his philosophy which find their origin in bodily experience.

Language

¹¹ Ibid, 159.

¹² Merleau-Ponty describes a dialectic of the body in a tangential discussion of Freud's psychoanalysis, which expands on this idea somewhat: "...the significance of psychoanalysis is not so much in making psychology "biological" as it is in discovering a dialectical movement in functions believed to be "purely bodily" and in reintegrating sexuality into human existence." (Ibid, 160.)

Merleau-Ponty begins his discussion on language by bringing into question the empiricist and rationalist accounts of the nature of signification. As is done throughout the text, he will find where both of these accounts share a common flaw and offer his own theory as a substitution. In this case, the critical concept that has hitherto been misunderstood is the role of words in language. Both empiricist and rationalist accounts of language render words inert, as something spurred on automatically by some other stimuli, and thus having no sense in themselves. Merleau-Ponty, in contrast, will offer an account of language where words themselves can possess an inherent sense.

To make his case, Merleau-Ponty again returns to clinical psychology, and specifically the phenomena of ‘aphasia’ (impaired communication) and those patients who exhibit its symptoms. Giving the example of a patient with that disorder, Merleau-Ponty remarks:

What the patient had lost, and what the normal person possessed, was not a certain stock of words, but rather a certain manner of using them. The same word that remains available to the patient on the level of automatic language escapes him on the level of spontaneous language; the same patient who easily finds the word “no” to express a negative answer to the doctor’s questions, that is, when the word signifies a present and lived negation, cannot pronounce it when engaged in an exercise without any affective or vital importance.¹³

The use and impairment of language are affected by one’s embodied relationship to the world. For the patient in the above example, the ability to communicate ‘no’ only comes about when placed in a situation where one takes up a negation, where one expresses it, yet is otherwise unavailable. Following shortly after the above quote: “Thus, behind the word we discover an attitude or a function of speech that conditions it.”¹⁴ This functional aspect of speech comes about in the sense that language is a tool and a means of accomplishing or taking up some

¹³ Ibid, 180.

¹⁴ Ibid.

particular relationship with the world. This ‘taking up’ is made more apparent as Merleau-Ponty continues with an example of patients who are unable to name colors.

...If they are asked to sort samples [of ribbon] according to their fundamental tint, it is first observed that they perform the task more solely and more meticulously than a normal subject. They bring the samples together to compare them, and they do not see at a glance which ones “go together”. Moreover, after having correctly assembled several blue ribbons, they commit incomprehensible errors...For to name an object is to tear oneself away from what its individual and unique properties are in order to see it as the representative of an essence or a category.¹⁵

Lack of access to the name of a color does not cause the sort of issue we might assume – a simple inability to produce the title of a phenomenon, such as knowing something is fuchsia but being unable to recall that precise phrase for a shade of purple. Rather, failure to communicate color manifests itself in an inability to separate observed phenomena into a broad category – for the patient, each ribbon is taken (as the artist might see it) as an individual visual stimuli, yet when asked to compare across different ribbons, they are unable *as they cannot take up a categorical-analytical relationship to the world*. Much as Schneider lacked the capacity to experience the world in a sexual manner, for the aphasiatic patient in this example, the impairment of language prevents seeing the world in a color-categorizable manner.

Merleau-Ponty notes that “the designation of objects never happens after recognition, it is recognition itself”¹⁶. Our ability to name something is identical to our ability to understand, all at once, its place and function within our world. This is elaborated by an example of naming:

When I focus on an object in the shadows and I say: “It’s a brush,” there is no concept of the brush in my mind beneath which I could subsume the object and that moreover could be linked with the word “brush” through a frequent

¹⁵ Ibid, 181.

¹⁶ Ibid, 183.

association. Rather, the word bears the sense, and by imposing it upon the object, I am conscious of reaching the object...the name is the essence of the object and resides in it, just like its color or its form.¹⁷

A word does not exist as a product of the intellect continually associated with, yet separate from, a mental experience. The relationship between word and object is not a Pavlovian association, but rather, to know and understand a word is to have a sense of how something or some action relates to a concrete situation. This begs a question which Merleau-Ponty rushes to address: if our relationship to language requires us to understand the ways in which words and phrases capture specific situations in the world, wouldn't learning anything from speech or communication be impossible? Assuming that to comprehend something, we already know how those words are used, wouldn't we need to understand someone else ahead of their attempt to communicate? Alternatively, wouldn't we find it impossible to understand someone describing a situation we weren't familiar with (e.g., understanding a culturally specific event) unless we had already experienced it ourselves? Despite these challenges, Merleau-Ponty is adamant that we can learn from communication.

The fact is that we have the power to understand beyond what we could have spontaneously thought. People can only speak to us in a language we already know, and each word of a difficult text awakens thoughts in us that belonged to us in advance, but these significations sometimes combine into a new thought that reworks them all, and we are transported to the heart of the book and connect with the source... Through speech, then, there is a taking up of the other person's thought, a reflection in others, a power of thinking *according to others*, which enriches our own thoughts¹⁸

The power of communication is in its ability to allow us access to the other. Merleau-Ponty speaks of a "gestural signification" laying below language, whereby the general sense of

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 184.

something else is communicated through language that we already know and are familiar with. Expression, be it through language or art, has the ability to impart its own sense – as we follow along and listen, we understand, at least partially, what is being communicated. “In short, every language teaches itself and imports its meaning into the listener’s mind.”¹⁹ Much as one is doubtlessly familiar with a moment of realization whereby a series of parts is related to a whole – and in that moment, each part has its meaning clarified – so too is this potential always placed within expression that intends towards a meaning.

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of language will feature in a discussion of ‘narrativization’ to come in the following chapter. Of particular interest will be how language, as a means of understanding the world, also comes about as an expression of a particular mode of relating to the world. A traumatic event must be ‘narrativized’ insofar as it must be understood in relation to a past and present, and this narrativization is a form of linguistic expression – carrying with it all of the possibilities and constraints which that particularized language has.

Language and Difference

So far, we have discussed how language itself has a sense which is imparted by our relationship to words and phrases, as well as the total structure of the language itself. Another feature of language deserving of attention relates to how languages differ. Merleau-Ponty opens his discussion of this phenomena by claiming that words admit of themselves a mental experience which offers us a sense of the word in itself.

At first, it seems impossible to allow either words or gestures an immanent signification, because the gesture is limited to indicating a certain relation between man and the perceptible world, because this world is given to the spectator through natural perception, and because the intentional object is hence

¹⁹ Ibid, 185.

offered to the observer at the same time as the gesture itself. The verbal gesture, however, intends a mental landscape that is not straightaway given to everyone, and it is precisely its function to communicate this landscape.²⁰

Regarding ‘immanent signification’, we should recall that Merleau-Ponty wished to claim that “language has a sense”, that is to say, that we might gain experience from interacting with words and language in a manner similar to the way in which we might gain experience from interacting with our tangible world. Merleau-Ponty begins by discussing the challenges to language having a sense in itself – namely that any given use of language or gesture is often received simultaneously with that which it intends to indicate. However, he holds that beyond mere natural perception (our act of sensing stimuli directly) and the simple correspondence of perception and gesture, there lies a mental experience *which is not universal or available to all persons*. The use of language described in the above passage has a function “to communicate this landscape”. Merleau-Ponty continues the above passage:

But culture here offers what nature does not provide. **Available significations, namely, previous acts of expression, establish a common world between speaking subjects to which current and new speech refers, just as the gesture refers to the sensible world.** [emphasis mine] And the sense of the speech is nothing other than the manner in which it handles this linguistic world or in which it modulates upon this keyboard of acquired significations. I grasp it in an undivided act that is as brief as a cry.²¹

Consider the bolded text in the above passage – a collective access to previous acts of expression enables access to a common mental world. There exists a linguistic mode of experience which is particularized across language groups, and which exists entirely due to human linguistic artifice. It is a mode of experience which is both produced by a common access to a shared linguistic

²⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Donald A. Landes, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2012), pp 192.

²¹ *Ibid.*

world – and yet it is also a linguistic world generated (and particularized) by the language itself. Language is both a product of specific experience, and experience a product of specific language. This applies to both current “and new” speech, which we might take to say that the process of linguistic individuation occurs endlessly.

With this in mind, only now do we gain a full sense of the implication of Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that all conscious thought requires language in some form to complete it.

The predominance of vowels in one language, of consonants in another, or systems of construction and syntax would not represent so many arbitrary conventions for expressing the same thought, but rather several ways for the human body to celebrate the world and to finally live it. This is why the *full* sense of a language is never translatable into another. We can speak several languages, but one of them always remains the one in which we live. In order to wholly assimilate a language, it would be necessary to take up the world it expresses, and we never belong to two worlds at the same time.²²

Variations in language are not merely arbitrary multiplications of artificial signs referring to explicit, tangible phenomena in the world. Rather, they are modes of bodily expression, of taking up a sense of word *and* world simultaneously. In naming and in acting, in contemplating and in making explicit our thoughts, we inhabit simultaneously our own (yet communally shared) linguistic and physical world. This linguistic world has a privileged aspect: our immediacy of experience is always filtered through a language – through *our* language – as we relate to our surroundings. Such a phenomena may be observed in the experience of a bilingual person who, when sufficiently moved by emotion, has their original language fly out from them in an expression of rage or joy.

²² Ibid, 193.

Recalling our central topic of harm, this discussion of the variations of language and the experience of language indicates that the experience of harm may modulate somewhat on the sense of language which that harm is understood through. This carries with it an implication for the concept of narrativization to be discussed later – if a traumatic experience must be situated in one's own personal history, and this situating effort occurs through primarily linguistic means, then the fact that languages possess different senses indicates a space of difference in the ways in which harm are experienced and understood.²³

Conclusion

We began this chapter by discussing the basic mechanics of Merleau-Ponty's body schema, which in turn led us to his concept of the intentional arc. Our body acts as the horizon of our experience, and the various thematic components of the intentional arc disclose situations in various ways for us. One such mode of disclosure was discussed in the following section – that of sexuality. Sexuality as a means of disclosure proved important to understand because it demonstrated the fact that there is no 'objective sexuality' observable in the world, but rather, certain situations could be taken up 'as sexual' and thus comprehended in that thematic way. After establishing this notion of thematic comprehension, we then discussed Merleau-Ponty's treatment of language, especially in terms of language as a means of 'taking up the world' – or of making things comprehensible through their naming. This 'taking up' however, was not mere signification associated with as-yet unnamed concepts, but rather, a natural product of the body's capacity for expression. In the final section of this chapter, we discussed the ability of language

²³ We should also recall, however, Merleau-Ponty's discussion of language as always reaching towards the expression of some full meaning. Differences in the specific type of narrativization or experience of harm should *not* be taken as a way to delegitimize or minimize the harm of one group vis-à-vis another; the impulse towards the expression and narrativization of pain comes from the body itself and its relation to the world – and all persons in all cultures everywhere possess a body.

to have a sense in itself – implying a unique mental experience of engagement with a language which may differ from other modes of expression.

CHAPTER TWO: TRAUMA

How do we phenomenologically experience trauma? In what ways can the experience of trauma vary across persons – and how might we recover from trauma? Within this chapter, I will explore several contemporary authors who address harm and trauma through the lens of an embodied philosophy similar to Merleau-Ponty's writings. The first section, 'Pain', will outline the most basic sources of difference in the experience of harm by way of pain-inducing stimuli. The section will also feature a discussion of taste as a means of showing how identical positive, as well as negative, sensations can vary from person to person. The second section, 'Trauma', will lay out how trauma is a specific, embodied, and existential form of harm that can affect our relationship to our world. It will also engage with works from Edward Casey and Caroline Woolson to ground the discussion in contemporary writing on the topic. Following this, the third section, 'Trauma and Authenticity', will show how the experience of trauma forces us to renegotiate our relationship to our world, and in doing so, offers a space of authenticity. This authenticity comes about from the isolating nature of trauma and the fact that it forces us to decide how to live, taking into account the renewed understanding of our old life which is imparted through its absence. After discussing this notion of Authenticity, the section 'Trauma and Silence' will explore the isolating and silencing aspects of trauma in more detail, showing how trauma can illude expression and communication. The final section of this chapter, 'Trauma and Narrativization', will show how, despite the aforementioned challenges, we are able to recontextualize our way of life and express that change in a social sense.

Pain

When speaking of harm, we may regard physical pain as the most straightforward example. We dislike experiencing pain and wish to avoid it whenever possible. When considering pain, however, we would do well to note that bodies have a natural variation in their experience of pain and discomfort. This is borne out both anecdotally and experientially. One such study is referenced by Roger Fillingim. Fillingim describes a 1944 experiment conducted by William Chapman and Chester Jones wherein a random selection of participants were subjected to a heat stimulus of identical intensity. The results showed striking diversity in the perception of pain (as self-reported on a scale of 0-100). While the average rating was around 70, there were respondents who gave scores as low as 4 to as high as 100. The same stimuli produced measurably different experiences of pain across different people. Regarding these phenomena, Fillingim offers a summary surprisingly cogent for our own investigation into harm:

...the experience of pain is sculpted by a mosaic of factors unique to the person, which renders the pain experience completely individualized. That is, there are pervasive and important individual differences in pain, and these individual differences produce pain experiences that are completely unique to the person experiencing them (i.e. they make the pain personal).²⁴

Fillingim goes on in the same article to lay out a “Biopsychosocial” model of pain – a system where biological, psychological, and social factors converge to explain the experience of pain in an individual. This is a noteworthy comparison to our own mode of theoretical investigation utilizing Merleau-Ponty’s existential philosophy – which also accounts for bodily phenomena through a dialectic of social and individual factors. The *personal* nature of pain will also take on

²⁴ Roger B. Fillingim, “Individual Differences in Pain: Understanding the Mosaic That Makes Pain Personal,” *PAIN* 158 (April 2017): S11–18, <https://doi.org/10.1097/j.pain.0000000000000775>, S11.

renewed importance when we consider the phenomenological experience of trauma and some of the literature relating to it in the upcoming pages.

We may provisionally summarize the above by saying that the experienced *intensity* of a harmful stimulus can vary in the experience of the beholder, even when the objective intensity is identical. Another quirk of biology as it relates to phenomenological experience should also be highlighted – that of variations in preference. By this, I mean that some identical stimuli can be perceived as pleasurable or harmful depending upon the person experiencing them. This is nowhere more evident than in notions of personal taste in food. Variations in taste are not explained entirely by genetics – as evidenced by studies wherein identical twins develop starkly different palettes.²⁵ Biology plays some part (most find the taste of nutritious foods pleasant, most find the taste of bleach revolting), but a combination of culture and irreducible personal preference also contribute to the formation of a taste palate. The noteworthy feature of taste as it relates to pain and harm, however, is the positive-to-negative range a single stimuli can have: while only the most extraordinary individuals would find the sensation of a hot stove pleasurable, there are many ‘divisive’ foodstuffs which some *do* find pleasurable, and others intolerable.

These two examples establish in pain and discomfort an important dichotomy: identical painful stimuli lead to disparities in experience of pain, and identical sensations of the palette are found enjoyable or harmful depending upon the individual partaking in them. Neither intensity or type of stimuli alone are enough to understand pain, discomfort, or the greater category of harm – it is necessary to consider them in light of the individual and cultural contexts in which they are

²⁵ Andrea D Smith et al., “Genetic and Environmental Influences on Food Preferences in Adolescence,” *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 104, no. 2 (August 2016): 446–53, <https://doi.org/10.3945/ajcn.116.133983>.

found. This links back to our previous discussion of the intentional arc, especially in regard to sexuality: objectively similar events or stimuli are taken up by the body in radically different ways – embodied experience is not the same as depersonalized observation.

Trauma

Trauma has a bodily aspect in a literal sense insofar as it is sensed and experienced through the body, as well as an existential sense that reflects an experience of alienation, detachment, and loss of capacity for meaningful engagement with the world. Forms of harm such as chronic or extreme pain, emotional loss, deep humiliation, or profound negative changes in our lives can affect the way we relate to our surroundings and ourselves, alienating us from our everyday routines.

To give a brief overview of this section, we will seek to understand how trauma is rooted in a profound physical, mental, or social harm which lingers after the fact. This lingering effect is experienced by the body in terms of a changed relationship to habitual routine, preventing a smooth transition back into everyday life. This existential effect divides the experience of trauma into two halves – the memory of a formerly unproblematic everyday routine, and the new experience of impairment when attempting to return back to that time.

As we explore the bodily-existential aspects of trauma it will be worthwhile to reflect upon two works by Edward Casey and Carolin Woolson. The former, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* features an excellent description of the act of remembering and re-experiencing traumatic events, as well as how this process of remembering affects our usual habits and routines. The latter, “Echoes of the Flesh: On the Ethical Significance of Bodily Remembrance” engages with Casey’s work to argue that traumatic experiences are profoundly

isolating and individuating, while carving out a possibility that trauma affords a space of authenticity and expression for the injured.

Casey begins his discussion of trauma by offering a definition of what constitutes a traumatic memory.

Traumatic memories assume many forms, ranging from those that are strictly psychical in status (e.g., memories of painful thoughts) to those that are thoroughly interpersonal (as in memories of perceiving someone else in distress). Traumatic *body* memories, however, arise from and bear on one's own lived body in moments of duress.²⁶

He continues by giving a specific example of his experience with a shattered tooth and the resulting painful repair. He recounts the initial experience of biting a kernel of popcorn and finding fragments of his tooth loose in his mouth, as well as the later sound of a dentist's drill and the pain from the excavation. From this description, he summarizes: "Notice, to begin with, how *particularized* this example of remembering is. In both of its closely related incidents, it bears on highly specific body parts – not only my mouth but a discrete part of it lying within a definite region."²⁷ The traumatic experience finds itself enmeshed in our relationship to our body – a particular feeling, a particular part, a particular experience. This particularity also has about it an important temporal factor – the traumatic event is wholly separate from our usual routines and habits; it is experienced as a violent break from our expected range of experiences.

Neither the initial trauma nor the attempt at dental restoration has anything habitual or repetitive about it. Each is strictly episodic and is remembered as such. Each impinges on and interrupts the amorphous history of my body and renders

²⁶ Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, MB 409 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 154.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

what is indefinite and undated in this history diachronically distinct: *first* the - breakdown, *then* the crowning activity several weeks later.²⁸

Trauma carries with it an irreversibility, a rupture from routine, a pervading sense of “unheimlich”, of uncanniness, of not being at home in one’s own body or life. This is imparted by both the sense of irreversibility, as well as the physical and emotional return to the moment of traumatic experience.

The emotionality of both incidents is also vividly conveyed: the shock of realizing that my mouth contained bits of tooth as well as bits of popcorn, the peculiar dread that accompanies deep drilling... Although I had no desire to re-experience these feelings – quite the contrary! – I found that they nonetheless afforded access to the original scenes of which they formed such a painful part.²⁹

In both physical sensation and emotional condition, trauma brings us around again and again to a particular experience in such a way that our body is at least partially invested in it, partially ‘back there again’, being subject to all of the effects of the moment, yet (owing to the inherently past nature of the phenomena) always lacking a sense of agency. The body tightens in stress and floods with anxiety – we are primed for danger or crisis, yet we are unable to *do* anything. This notion lies behind Casey’s discussion of the dissolution of the lived body.

Another facet of the particularizing proclivity of traumatic body memories has to do with the *fragmentation* of the lived body. Where habitual body memory typically concerns the body as a coordinated whole – indeed, constitutes it as a single *compositum* – a traumatic body memory bears on what Lacan has called “*le corps morcellé*.” This is the body as broken down into uncoordinated parts and thus as incapable of the type of continuous, spontaneous action undertaken by the intact body (“intact” thanks precisely to its habitualities, which serve to ensure efficacy and regularity).³⁰

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid, 155.

³⁰ Ibid.

Trauma renders our relationship to our body ‘unnatural’ and explicit. Instead of our body disappearing entirely into whatever task we decide to enmesh ourselves in, some part finds itself alienated from this whole, made explicit and vulnerable. Lacking the sense of our unified, ‘whole’ body, we are separated from our habits and routines.

The fragmented body is inefficacious and irregular; indeed, its possibilities of free movement have become constricted precisely because of the trauma that has disrupted its spontaneous actions. Body memories of this trauma will necessarily reflect the same fragmentation, as will the terms descriptive of such memories: e.g., "particularization," "isolation of object," "concentration." Such terms can be viewed as giving dimensions of the traumatized body, especially as it acts to inhibit action.³¹

If we recall our earlier discussion of Merleau-Ponty, we can find a close relation to the notion of capacity and body schema – the sorts of things our body can do reveal themselves in our experiential world as possibilities which call out to us: notions of speech or movement are natural and habitual when we have the capacity to exercise them. However, when trauma impacts our ability to perform actions effortlessly and unobtrusively, this untroubled relationship to our routinized world breaks down. This is paralleled by Casey as well.

Although this inhibition is more dramatically evident in cases of, say, dire back pain, it is still quite manifest in my own tooth trauma, which served to inhibit mastication. Much of the trauma and its associated affect consisted in this very inhibition: or. More precisely, in the realization that “I will henceforth not be able to eat as freely as before.” The disabling nature of body trauma here stands in stark contrast with the enabling character of bodily habitudes; and just as the former implies the dissolution of the intact body, so the latter implies its continual re-synthesis.³²

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid, 155-156.

At this point, we may restate the phenomenological experience of trauma in its entirety. A traumatic experience has its inception in a profound harm, either physical, psychical, or social, which leaves a lasting mark on the person experiencing it. This after-effect is not abstractly located in the recesses of the mind, but is instead manifested in the lived body. The trauma is localized to some region of the body, to some specific relationship with the world, which is impeded by the return to the traumatic experience. This breakdown of normal existential function serves to divide the trauma into a 'before and after' – a rupture of personal history.

Trauma and Authenticity

How does one attempt to recover from a traumatic experience? This question will link Casey and Woolson's writing and show the scope of difference implied by Merleau-Ponty's embodied philosophy as it applies to matters of social organization. Casey concludes his chapter on trauma by briefly highlighting the way in which traumatic memory seems to fade over time. He points to the general tendency for minor childhood traumas to become mollified with the passage of time. (For example, the act of remembering sitting on an ant pile or falling from a tree are more humorous or nostalgic than they are outright harmful.) An exception is drawn for particularly ghastly or damaging experiences though, which seem to resist this smoothing with the passage of time. Casey points to the experience of humiliation and dehumanization which comes with surviving time in a concentration camp – no amount of time seems equipped to heal such a wound. Excepting extreme cases, he explains this 'healing tendency' of trauma by way of reflection.

One main way [the healing of trauma over time] happens, as one might well suspect by now, is that a tendency sets in to transform these memories into reminiscences and recollections...Doubtlessly defensive in origin, these

transformations have attained an autonomy sufficient for me to take independent pleasure in reactivating them in just these comparatively innocent forms.³³

By situating a trauma in a particular place and time, as well as contextualizing it on our own terms, we manage some degree of control over the traumatic experience. This, in turn, prevents the re-experiencing of a traumatic event from being as harmful as it would be otherwise. (Casey notes the possibility of a cycle of harm from traumatic experience, wherein a traumatic event causes repetitive remembering which must, itself, be managed else it causes further harm.)

Woolson's "Echoes of the Flesh" engages with Casey's structure of remembering, providing a critical insight to this notion of 'reflection.

Insofar as these [traumatic] memories interfere with and hence interrupt the body's functioning, they place demands upon the body to find strategies for coping with the trauma with a view to reorienting it back into the world of its habitual practices.³⁴

Our habits – and our relationship to them – are some of the most critically important factors in the makeup of our existential selves. (As separated from our intellectual 'identities', which are more products of intellectual refinement and self-perception than they are reflective of our most common ways of existing in the world.) Our handling of ruptures with our habits offer, as Woolson correctly points out, a moment of freedom in which we can both define ourselves and change our way of being in the world.

The space [traumatic experience] opens up provides a perspective outside of the norms, standards, and practices of routine bodily engagement in the cultural milieu by being literally torn from them, and this space can, in turn, become a

³³ Ibid, 156.

³⁴ Carolin Woolson, "Echoes of the Flesh: On the Ethical Significance of Bodily Remembrance," in *Interrogating Ethics: Embodying the Good in Merleau-Ponty*, 2006, 157-158.

space of resistance, critique, and ultimately, one hopes, reconfiguration of those same norms, standards, and practices.³⁵

The idea of habit acting as an uncritical locus of the self has significant play across contemporary existential philosophy, and a brief digression would help to give a full sense of Woolson's thinking. Recalling the progression of thinkers which underpin the theory we are currently engaging with, we may trace a path from Heidegger, through Merleau-Ponty, and finally through these currently active academics who engage with these concepts and notions. For the existential importance of 'habit', we find its inception in Heidegger's writings on the *they-self*, the mode of existential engagement wherein we lose ourselves in our social habitations. Turning directly towards the text of *Being and Time*:

The Self of the everyday Dasein³⁶ is the they-self, which we distinguish from the authentic Self—that is, from the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way. As they-self, the particular Dasein has been dispersed into the “they”, and must first find itself. This dispersal characterizes the ‘subject’ of that kind of Being which we know as concerned absorption in the world we encounter as closest to us. If Dasein is familiar with itself as they-self, this means at the same time that the “they” itself prescribes that way of interpreting the world and Being-in-the-world which lies closest.³⁷

We can see in the above passage the fundamental features which set habit up as a critical formative aspect of our identity, as well as why a rupture from habit provides an opportunity for profound change in the self. The above quote describes the relationship we have towards an everyday, ‘social’ mode of being – a mode of being termed the ‘they-self’. We find ourselves in the ‘they-self’ whenever we are engaged in any of the tasks required for our daily functioning in society – such as commuting, making small talk, engaging in quotidian and automatic work,

³⁵ Ibid, 158.

³⁶ Dasein – literally “In Being” – is Heidegger's term for human *being*, our existential mode in the world.

³⁷ Martin Heidegger, John Macquarrie, and Edward S. Robinson, *Being and Time* (New York: HarperPerennial/Modern Thought, 2008), 167.

partaking in our usual leisure, etc. This is what is meant by “concernful absorption in the world we encounter as closest to us.” The matters which affect and compose our daily routine pull us into this familiar (if not outright comfortable) mode of being. When we find ourselves in the mode of the ‘they-self’, the world reveals itself to us in that same everyday manner. Problems are everyday problems, solutions are everyday solutions, highs are everyday highs, lows are everyday lows. Provided the experience of a novel occurrence is not significantly powerful enough to fully shunt one out of the ‘they-self’, it will be ‘just another part of the day’. This is what is meant by existing in the ‘with-world’: experience orients itself towards everydayness, since both problems and solutions are sufficiently mundane that they do not force an existential re-evaluation of how one conducts oneself. This is what is meant by the concluding sentence – we are not ‘I’ as authentic individuated selves, but rather, are ‘they-self’.

For Heidegger, the fundamental authentic relationship we can have as Dasein is our relationship towards death, since it represents an unavoidable and permanent rupture from our basic existential capacity of care, as well as our ability to fall into our worldly projects and lose ourselves. The “possibility of the impossibility of being” serves to make explicit our time-bound nature, for we know we will not be able to engage in every project indefinitely, nor will we be able to nurture every worldly care. At some point, if we understand ourselves in an authentic manner, we will know we must decide how we will relate to the world in the context of our temporal finitude. This notion of authenticity repeats itself in our discussion of trauma.

Woolson’s description of trauma as an event which ruptures us from habit closely parallels the mechanics of our death in Heideggerian philosophy – by being separated from our everyday routine, we are thrown back onto ourselves and forced to choose a manner of existing in relation

to the world once more. From this existential authenticity comes a deep and durable space of freedom to define oneself. Such a parallel is explicit in Woolson's writings when she comments:

What occurs in trauma, then, is a shattering of the self, in both its material and ideal aspects insofar as these typically relate to and mirror one another... And, unlike habitual memories, in which the individual and the collective aspects of one's being virtually collapse into one another, in trauma a rift forms between them, a rift that destroys the intimate bond, the uninterrupted flow between them which habitual practices typically manifest.³⁸

Trauma inflicts in partial measure what death inflicts in full – harm to our everyday way of existing in the world, and an inability to engage with our everyday projects. However, an important difference is apparent: there is no 'after-death' in existential terms, simply 'resoluteness' in anticipating the inevitability of death. There is, however, an 'after-trauma'. Death is an inevitability which bounds our existential selves, and while trauma is in some measure a part of all of our lives, the degree and intensity of it is more a product of the vicissitudes of fortune than of any specific human destiny. This is again shown in Woolson's text.

A traumatized body is a body divided from itself and from its world; it has a body bereft of meaning structures, which other bodies take for granted; it is a body that must reconstruct itself out of its own dismemberment. But is it not also a body that is in a unique position of being able to become a creative body, of creating new meaning structures, new behaviors for itself, and, by example, potentially for others as well?³⁹

In other words, the profundity of trauma lies in the fact that it asks us to do what even death does not – take up our world once more, repair ruptured ties, and found ourselves anew. Notice the end of the above excerpt – “*and, by example, potentially for others as well?*” Woolson draws an

³⁸ Carolin Woolson, “Echoes of the Flesh: On the Ethical Significance of Bodily Remembrance,” in *Interrogating Ethics: Embodying the Good in Merleau-Ponty*, 2006, 159.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 161.

important inference – personal trauma may be an example to others for how to act authentically themselves. This is particularly remarkable in light of the tendency for trauma to prevent communication and language.

This section contributes to our core question – “How do we understand and respond to harm in an embodied sense?” – by establishing, in detail, how an experience of profound harm forces one to renew their relationship to their world in light of their injury. Harm makes explicit those features of our everyday life that would not otherwise come to our understanding, and it forces us to found a new way of relating towards our previous projects with this understanding in mind.

Trauma and Silence

The second key notion in Woolson’s work is that of trauma as silencing, as suppressing language, as preventing communication. This relates closely to our earlier discussion of reflection – and may well be the reason why such reflection is required in the first place.

Woolson draws heavily from Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, which takes up this notion of pain as silencing directly.

...as Scarry points out, there is a peculiar inexpressibility about pain. We can speak about events or actions, which *cause* pain, but for *pain itself* there is very little vocabulary on hand to describe it. She notes further that “physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it...”⁴⁰

Pain carries about itself a linguistic inexpressibility; this notion is clear enough. However, as she continues, I believe Woolson makes a mistake by comparing the silence of pain to the ‘silence’ of habitual behaviors.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 158.

This “shattering of language” (which is brought about, on [Scarry’s] account, by the fact that pain has no external referent and hence is extremely difficult to objectify in language) is significant, for it suggests that language bears striking similarities to habitual bodily memories insofar as: (a) it, too, is a routine daily practice, an engagement with the external world which for the most part we take up and utilize in more or less uncritical ways; and (b) consequently, like habit, the uncritical ways in which we make use of it allow it to remain a highly efficient means of reproducing the relations of power embedded within them...⁴¹

This conception of a ‘habit parallel’ to explain the inexpressibility of pain is wrongheaded.

Habits are phenomenologically unobtrusive because they are pre-anticipated and prepared for, and our worldly engagement with them is sufficiently dexterous that, much like the example of a ‘ready-to-hand’ tool in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, the situation becomes an extension of ourselves. We may manipulate our habitual tasks in any number of ways in exactly as automatic of a process as we might direct our car towards a destination, or our hands towards an object. Such habit becomes ‘inexpressible’ because it never arrives in our experience as requiring cognitive perception. (Unless, of course, like Heidegger’s example of the tool, in its breaking its nature arrives all at once in the form of a present-at-hand object.) Pain, in contrast, is *essentially and definitionally obtrusive*. Unobtrusive pain is an oxymoron, it would not be pain if it was not perceived in such a way as to shunt us out of our habits and projects, to grind at our usual involvement in the world, to either dramatically break us from our comfortable routine, or to render us unable to engage with our routines in the first place.

Towards this end, Merleau-Ponty offers a much more parsimonious understanding of the inexpressibility of pain through his discussion of language. “A thought, content to exist for itself outside the constraints of speech and communication, would fall into the unconscious the

⁴¹ Ibid, 159.

moment it appears, which amounts to saying that it would not even exist for itself.”⁴² Pain exists outside of language because it cannot be captured by language. For the body, language must express the sense of something to be coherent, and pain manages to elude the communication of its sense because of its extraordinary subjectivity. It ‘does not exist for itself’ insofar as in moments of extreme pain, we are unable to engage with the world (rather, we recoil from it) and as such, are unable to reach forward and grasp, linguistically, what it is that we experience. Instead, we tend to have a time-shifted experience of pain: we attempt to signify and express the pain after we collect ourselves, after we return to the capability of engagement with the world. In its most extreme example, we might look to an athlete who is ‘knocked out cold’; the experience of the event could only be a recollection of the event, since the experience itself is the lack of an experience, a ‘going dark’. In much the same way, the experience of severe pain is more the ‘experience of a lack of coherence’ since our usual relationship to the world (and thus our usual linguistic milieu) is unavailable to us.

We might better understand this silencing notion of pain by attempting to conceive of a ‘language of pain’ which could hypothetically capture its full sense. Recalling that language is a means of expressing or relating to the world in an embodied sense, we are faced with the immediate challenge of understanding that pain is an obtrusive experience which pushes us out of our engagements. Thus, for our ‘pain language’ to exist, we would either have to have the experience of pain become an end in itself, or for such pain, regardless of its intensity, to still allow for regular engagement with routines habitual tasks. The former case seems incoherent and improbable, the latter returns us again to the definitional problem of pain – if it doesn’t produce a

⁴² Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Donald A. Landes, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2012), 183.

sensation which (at a minimum) distracts or (at a maximum) incapacitates us, are we equivocating mere sensing for the experience of pain? ⁴³

Instead, we may conceive of pain as, in itself, thematic. Pain ‘silences’ because it, like our earlier discussion of sexuality in the intentional arc, is not usually something experience alone, but rather it suffuses experience with a particular type of sensation, driving us back from a situation in the same way in which sexuality might draw us forward. Pain inhibits, breaks up, complicates, and dissolves our relationship towards pain-inflicting events, and it does so in a way which – owing to its embodied nature – resists comparison and analysis.

Trauma and Narrativization

Pain alters and escapes our experience. Trauma, as a residue of pain, presents a challenge to express because its initial source is inexpressible and it, like pain, tends to inhibit a full engagement with the world. Narrativization serves as a means to integrate injury back into routine, to explain its occurrence, to create a bounded distance between myself today and myself then. If the cause of a trauma is imagined as something which can be controlled or avoided, if the effect of the trauma has been placed in some sense of meaning, then, like an asterisk appending a troubling fact, trauma may be relegated to the background once more. This narrativization,

⁴³ I, being a lover of shlock horror films, am reminded of such cult classics as *Hellraiser* or *Event Horizon*. Perhaps the ghoulish creatures of those cinematic universes might be an extreme fictive version of the sorts of things which might have an ‘expressible’ language of pain. This, however, raises an issue of Sado-masochism: to be sadistic is to find pleasure from the infliction of pain (thus avoiding pain oneself), to be masochistic is to find pleasure in pain. This, again, seems to subvert the definition of pain once more – though extreme pleasure might be just as disruptive to our usual routines and worldly engagement as extreme pain alone.

Perhaps in a more grounded sado-masochistic pairing there might be some degree of the expression and communication of pain, albeit unintentionally. Consider the film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane*, wherein Bette Davis torments Joan Crawford. Surely the sadistic Baby Jane has an intuitive, embodied understanding of the harm she inflicts on Blanch, understanding in the moment what she does. This inherent understanding goes beyond vocalized language, especially since it shows an understanding that Blanche does not intentionally communicate. There is an ‘understanding’ of pain in this example, but only because, for the sadist, the infliction of pain *is* a habituated engagement with the world, always through the medium of the other.

however, carries with it an implication that the road back from trauma is inextricably intertwined with language and culture, with words and surroundings.

We might conceive of the linguistic aspect of narrativization along three levels: (1) the literal words we choose to express when recounting a traumatic event and situating it into our lived experience, (2) the language we think and communicate in as we reflect on our trauma, and (3) the specific cultural milieu in which we have developed and in which we use our language and how that offers a particularly individuated sense to our lived experience. Recalling Merleau-Ponty's discussion of language, we understand that language has a sense for itself, that the types of intellectual and emotional phenomenological experiences vary according to whichever language we use, because language is an encompassing way of taking up the world. The words we choose, the language those words are from, and the lived experience which our language is learned always situate us in our relationship to ourselves.

Our language establishes a relationship to the traumatic event, often in the context of renegotiating our agency and attempting to 'resolve' and move past some of the most disruptive traumatic feelings. Consider the power we have in constructing our narrative experience. The specific phrases and words we use to address a traumatic event imply an understanding of how we took up that experience, of what our relationship to it was both then and now. Portraying something as 'farcical' imparts a degree of stoicism to our reaction, marks the traumatic event as being so grotesque as to be almost comical, and carries with it a subtle normative judgement: fate has given me something preposterous, which, even wounded, I will mock. Finding trauma to be a 'random vicissitude' or 'freak accident' comforts in part by acknowledging the uncontrollability we have surrounding it, its slim odds of reoccurring, and the fact that it could not possibly be a regular occurrence. In much the same way, a 'grim necessity' is contextualized through the

perceived inevitability of the occurrence. The passing of a loved one may be contextualized as either or all of the above, all of which is a negotiation of our lack of agency in matters of life and death. In a similar way, we may contextualize those actions which we undertook and yet bring us pain as ‘miscalculated’, ‘unintended’, or part of some ‘terrible choice’.

The specific language we use (in the sense of entire languages such as English, French, etc.) also affects our relationship to trauma. In the most basic sense, our language determines the sorts of words available to us as we negotiate an understanding with our trauma. The Japanese *Shō ga nai* (しょうがない) literally means “it can’t be helped”, but this does not capture the totality of this stoic aphorism. To say *shoganai* is to say something is simply part of life, and that it would be pointless to fight against it. It is a statement of quietism, often finding expression in regard to one’s relationship to society and the powers that be. This is highlighted by the many critiques of such assumed helplessness, such as the woman quoted in Robin Leblanc’s *Bicycle Citizens*, which investigates the discrepancies in political behavior between Japanese housewives and husbands. “Women are different about organizations and power. Men just give in to them. They say *shoganai* * [there's nothing to be done].”⁴⁴ The variation in words carry a variation in the sense of the words, which, in turn, carries with it a variation in the narrativization of trauma as experienced. Saying ‘*shoganai*’ communicates an entirely different attitude than saying the American English ‘bullshit’ when faced with an unfair burden. Both are a means of taking up the world, either through quietism or resistance. (The linguistic variation carries on here if we consider the English ‘bullshit’ with the French ‘connerie’ – there is no direct translation between

⁴⁴ Robin M. LeBlanc, *Bicycle Citizens: The Political World of the Japanese Housewife*, Asia--Local Studies/Global Themes (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1999), 144.

the two, and the ‘con’ of ‘connerie’ in French is both more nuanced and in practice less vulgar than the comparatively direct English sentiment of ‘bullshit’.)

The third aspect of linguistic variation in language comes from cultural differences. The specific milieu in which we develop shapes the use of our language, separating ‘mutual intelligibility’ from true cultural congruence. I may be able to understand fluently the English of an Australian, a New Zealander, or a Briton, but I lack the cultural familiarity to grasp the sense which many of the words have. A ‘Ute’ and ‘pick-up truck’ nominally mean the same thing, but they elicit different experiences, memories, and contexts in the listeners. Utes are tied up intractably with Australia and New Zealand, Pick-ups with the United States. For an American, a Ute also likely carries with it their experiences of *hearing and using* the novel word, more likely than not in the context of an overseas trip. Perhaps the same is true for the Kiwi who has driven a pickup truck on a visit to the United States. Within countries, there are countless such regional linguistic shibboleths as well. A ‘Cubano’ sandwich in Tampa is hard to find, but a ‘Cuban’ sandwich can be had almost anywhere. Travel further north, and the opposite is true – imitators over-emphasize the Spanish culinary heritage and grammar structure, wrongly attributing the Cuban sandwich to Cuban nationals in Cuba, rather than the Cuban-Floridian diaspora. In likewise fashion, merely knowing about the existence of Cel-Ray evokes a shared bond between those who have had it. An artifact of the 19th century still around today, the celery-flavored soda conjures an unmistakable feeling of New York and its Jewish diaspora, and more personally, memories of my Grandfather and the stories of his childhood. The word and its memory are a window to a space out of time, and this context is impossible to convey without the shared, lived cultural experience.

If something as benign as a sandwich or a soda can carry with it such a divergent cultural experience and sentiment, we ought to have respect for the degree to which persons' narrativized relationships to their trauma also carry with them powerfully and inextricably enculturated notions. Those who have spent any amount of time interacting with the American healthcare system have a dual experience of a battle against sickness and a battle against bankruptcy, of the challenges of organizing time off work, of the mental and physical strain of attempting to act as a caretaker or to recover under such unusual circumstances. Such cultural variation also exists when a loved one is lost – the means of organizing a funeral or other such mourning event carry with them any number of religious and personal matters which must be taken into account in order to find a way to properly provide dignity for the departed and a space of healing for those who mourn. The volatility of culture in the face of disruptive events must also be considered – one must have unique sympathy for those who have lost loved ones during the Coronavirus epidemic, where even the decision to gather to mourn is beset by calculations of safety and risk. They are individuated in a special and unfortunate way, sitting at the confluence of countless levels of cultural context – of their practice of mourning, of their religious convictions, of their familial and personal preferences, and of the challenge of the moment which marks them, forever, as having had to face difficulties which their friends and acquaintances have not. Such specific trauma individuates, drawing one closer to those who have shared such trials, and drawing them away from others who did not.

There is a synergistic effect at work between language and culture. Our language affords us specific means of taking up the world, and specific senses of words and phrases to understand the world around us. In much the same way, the world around us shapes the sorts of words and language we seek to use, as well as imparts a sense on certain words, bounding them socially,

temporally and geographically to a specific group, time, and space. When we say shogunai or bullshit, not only are we conveying the culturally specific sense behind the word, but we cast it out towards a trauma which is also encased in a culture, contributing to and aggravating our harm in some ways, diminishing and soothing it in others. Assume I reject quietism and take the latter of these two phrases, the path of resistance: does my protestation come from an internal sense, emanating from a space of pure freedom, or is it a mechanic of my reason naturally outputting the phrase as a simple calculation of the circumstances which caused my harm in the first place? In this way both reason and feeling, both individual and culture co-exist at the crossroads of lived experience.

Language plays an important part in how we respond to harm. It forms the building blocks of the way in which we make sense of an event upon reflection, as well as how we express and communicate our feelings about such an event to ourselves and to others. It intersects with our own agency insofar as *what we choose to think* must pass through the filter of *our ways of speaking*. Merleau-Ponty's assertion that languages have a sense all their own complicates this finding – for it implies that language, much like culture, places a thumb on the scale of our decision making. Yet this is, perhaps, not surprising. For Merleau-Ponty, language emerges from everyday life, intertwined with it – the fact that languages vary in their sense flows from the fact that the daily lives which employ and share those languages are also different. They capture different aspects of a shared human capacity for expression and communication, different aspects of living and doing in the world.

Conclusion

This chapter began by discussing pain and taste as a means of showing differences in experience from identical stimuli. Identical hot temperatures resulted in different reported

experiences of pain, identical foods resulted in different experiences of taste. This showed that pain exists for the body in a contextual – rather than objective – way. The second section, “Trauma” outlined how intense experiences of pain or harm can have a residual effect which inhibits our natural and unobtrusive relation to the world. Trauma leaves a residue preventing our comfortable re-engagement with our everyday routine, dividing it into a before and after. The third section, “Trauma and Authenticity” discussed how a traumatic break with our habituated routines affords us a space in which to re-negotiate our way of living in relation to the broken status quo. The fourth section, “Trauma and Silence” discussed the challenges to such a re-negotiation owing to the inexpressibility of pain. The fifth and final section, “Trauma and Narrativization”, explored the role language plays in the healing process, as well as the inherently social nature of language – of language as both differentiating and yet affording an indelible path back to the social, back to a world with others.

CONCLUSION

Harm as a theoretical concept holds special interest to political theory: it is one of the inescapable aspects of the exercise of power and of the political in general. When, why, and how power is deployed depends in part upon an understanding of how harm will follow from such a decision. Attempts to assuage or reduce harm sit at the center of discussions of both ethics and of humanitarian policy drafting. Views on how to distribute harms forms the basis of rights discussions. Who can be harmed and to what extent, how equal should the distribution of harms be – all of these factor both into broad debates about the nature of justice and more granular aspects of lawmaking. For just one of countless examples, consider the ‘Castle Doctrine’ in Florida Law – establishing the right of a homeowner to kill or injure a perceived intruder acts not only as a means of broadening the notion of self-defense, but also as a way of staking claims on the distribution of harm. Lawmakers – and their constituents, to the extent that we believe political representation holds true – arrive at the decision that suspected intruders are more deserving of harm, and perhaps more pointedly, that homeowners are entitled to greater degrees of discretion in their avoidance of harm. What we understand about harm informs us of the full effects of the exercise of power and our relationship to it.

Over the course of our discussion, we have come to find that the experience of trauma is simultaneously both individuating and yet is conditioned by its socio-linguistic interpretation. As preempted by our discussion of pain, trauma is particularized and varied across persons, even in response to identical inciting events. The experience of trauma is mediated through language, as

language underpins the means by which we express and make sense of our experience. That language itself, however, possesses its own sense stemming from a socially generated meaning and its relation to a socially generated common world.

Trauma forces one out of their habitual routine towards a space of existential self-isolation, yet this isolation is interpreted through a self-dialogue, which in turn is conditioned through the socially generated sense of language. Much like Schneider's illness or Heidegger's notion of the broken 'present-at-hand' tool, one is cast out of their everyday existence because trauma impedes their capacity to return. In doing so, both the old way of living and the impairment which interrupted it are made obtrusive. The process of founding a new relationship to the world comes about by way of expressing the newfound obtrusiveness and rupture, contextualizing it, and deciding how and in what way to return to one's former life. This occurs by means of a narrativization.

The healing process of narrativization represents a merging of the isolating, self-authentic necessity to renegotiate one's role in the world after trauma with the inherently social practice of carrying out this negotiation through an internal language. The expression of the rupture one suffers from a trauma, as well as the reasoning for returning to everyday life in a particular way, occurs through language. The sense of language itself shapes some of the characteristics of how the trauma was experienced (both in the moment and in reflection), how the rupture is understood, and the sorts of ways in which one can return to everyday life. That language, however, does not gain its sense in a vacuum, nor is it entirely instilled by the traumatized individual. Instead, the sense of language is generated by the collective actions of an entire social world expressing its ways of being, and in doing so, it contributes to a collective understanding of the sense of language. This social aspect of narrativization is redoubled when, upon

renegotiating how one relates to the world, one actually begins to *do* so – bringing the self-authentic negotiation back to the social, and changing the ways in which others can relate to the world by example. This authentic moment of return contributes, by way of its underlying decision, some new understanding of existence back to the wider social world.

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