

Encyclopedia of Philosophy and the Social Sciences

Personal Identity and Trauma

Contributors: Byron Kaldis

Print Pub. Date: 2013

Online Pub. Date: May 29, 2013

Print ISBN: 9781412986892

Online ISBN: 9781452276052

DOI: 10.4135/9781452276052

Print pages: 709-711

This PDF has been generated from SAGE knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

10.4135/9781452276052.n266

Philosophy/Social Sciences

Many survivors of traumatic events have reported that their selves were shattered by the trauma. Survivors of Nazi death camps have said that they died in the camps, war veterans have remarked [p. 709 ↓] that they lost themselves in battle, and rape victims have written of missing their lost selves. This entry attempts to make sense of these cryptic claims by discussing the effects of trauma on the self and exploring the connections between the philosophical literature on personal identity and the psychological literature on recovering from trauma. To the extent that social science deals with social persons, and hence with notions of selfhood, the study of traumatic experiences that shatters unified conceptions of selfhood is as crucial to social science as it has been to philosophers discussing personal identity over time.

Philosophical Accounts of Personal Identity

The question of personal identity, as addressed by philosophers for centuries, has traditionally been framed as “What are the conditions that make it possible (or impossible) for the same person to persist over time?” The various answers philosophers gave to this question were taken to be revealed by our intuitive responses to thought experiments, such as the one proposed by the 17th-century British philosopher John Locke, in which the consciousness of a prince is transferred from the prince to the body of a cobbler while the consciousness of the cobbler comes to inhabit the body of the prince. “Who is (now) the prince?” Locke asked. Locke, who defended a psychological criterion of personal identity, according to which what makes someone the same person over time is that person's consciousness, answered, “The one with the cobbler's body.” Other personal identity theorists who have defended a bodily or biological criterion of personal identity have answered, “The one with the prince's body.”

Philosophers since Locke have continued to puzzle over whether persons can survive transformations of various kinds. In recent decades, personal identity theorists have come up with increasingly imaginative and high-tech thought experiments involving freezing and thawing, dissolution and reconstitution, fission, and teletransportation, designed to test our intuitions about what makes someone the same person over time.

They have not, until very recently, however, paid attention to the actual experiences of real people who claim to have been utterly transformed by trauma. This may be explained by the fact that what philosophers have traditionally sought in a theory of personal identity is an account of what makes it possible to reidentify a person at one time as the same person that existed at another time. Philosophers have sought a criterion of numerical identity for persons over time, a criterion different from, but with the same function as, a criterion of numerical identity for things, such as trees and ships and bicycles. If, in contrast, we want a theory of personal identity to be an account of a person's self-conception over time, then the study of trauma, including the examination of first-person narratives of trauma survivors, becomes not only relevant but also necessary to the search for a theory with adequate explanatory power.

Psychological Accounts of Trauma

Following the psychiatrist Judith Herman, this entry defines trauma as an experience of being completely helpless in the face of an overwhelming, life-threatening force. Whether it results from human-inflicted violence or a natural disaster, trauma overwhelms a survivor's agency and cognitive capacities and can lead to posttraumatic stress disorder, with symptoms that include hyper-vigilance, heightened startle response, sensory flashbacks, dissociation, and numbing. The intermingling of mind and body in these symptoms highlights the embodied nature of the self and suggests the inadequacy of both strictly psychological and strictly biological criteria of personal identity.

Psychologists and psychiatrists have observed that trauma survivors suffer the severing of bonds of trust with others and the shattering of fundamental assumptions about their safety in the world. The loss of sustaining attachments to others—family, friends, and community—is experienced as a loss of self by many trauma survivors. This phenomenon, along with the essential role reconnection to others plays in healing from trauma, is taken by some philosophers to support the view that the self exists only in *relation* to other people.

Trauma survivors who lose the ability to identify with their past selves and to project themselves into the future can become paralyzed in a present that no longer makes

any sense. In order to carry on, they need to find meaning in the world again; talking about their traumatic experiences in the company of empathetic others has been found to facilitate this. This can be taken to motivate the view that the self is not only relational but also *narrative* in structure, unable to continue without the ability to tell a story about itself. The philosopher Hilde Lindemann [p. 710 ↓] Nelson stresses the importance for survivors of being able to come up with empowering counternarratives to repair narrative identities damaged by trauma.

As illuminating as the study of trauma can be for understanding the nature of personal identity, it remains unclear just what we ought to make of survivors' claims to have outlived their former selves. Unlike casually made everyday claims such as "I'm not myself today," trauma survivors' claims of lost or destroyed selves appear to be more than mere *façons de parler*. But if they are literally true, then who is the "I" who is able to say "I am no longer the self I was before the trauma"? What connects the "I" referring to the speaker with the "I" referring to the pre-trauma self? Whether or not these questions can be answered, the conversation between psychologists and philosophers about personal identity and trauma is a lively and engaging one that has only just begun.

Susan J. Brison

10.4135/9781452276052.n266

See also

Further Readings

Brison, S. J. (2002). *Aftermath: Violence and the remaking of a self* . Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and recovery* . New York, NY: Basic Books.

Janoff-Bulman, R. (1992). *Shattered assumptions: Towards a new psychology of trauma* . New York, NY: Free Press.

Nelson, H. L. (2001). *Damaged identities, narrative repair* . Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

