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EMBODIED TRAUMA AND HEALING¹

How did Embodied Trauma and Healing come to be?

Existential Phenomenology of Addiction was my first book. Embodied Trauma and Healing grew out of questions that I had from that work, and also the work with the organization that worked with survivors of human trafficking, and I was working particularly with trauma and training in somatic experiencing. So, it emerged from original questions that I had from Levinas and Kierkegaard that led me to exploring into different kinds of suffering, which is where this book emerged out of.

Which differentiations would you make between different kinds of suffering?

So, I think the whole idea of suffering is fascinating. Kierkegaard would frame it as an existential threat — which is more a relational, kind of inward suffering. Levinas talks about suffering in terms of the lived body experience. Actually, I was really interested in the kind of existential and phenomenological suffering, where it is not just medical terminology where we look at a diagnosis of the body or of mental illness but also existential experiences of suffering such as a displacement from home. Or, even, especially in something like sex trafficking as an existential rupture of relationships where is the betrayal of a person that ends up trafficking you. So kind of looking at both the body which phenomenology especially through Merleau-Ponty with the suffering body makes space for but also existential elements with someone like Kierkegaard is possible.

When you write about Embodied Trauma, we have Levinas differentiating between useless suffering and what he calls “the trauma of astonishment.” Could you say a bit about how an embodiment of trauma and lived experience can be conceptualized or thought about, or even practically look?

I think trauma can be a quite ambiguous experience. There are differentiations of trauma. The diagnostic statistical manual would characterize PMS as the kind of way of experiencing trauma, and the way of being in the world in that way would be as specific symptoms. [According to] Freud: [there's a]

¹ The following is an interview conducted between Magdalena Sedmak of the University of Vienna, special issue editor, and Anna Westin in regard to her book *Embodied Trauma and Healing: Critical Conversations on the Concept of Health* (London: Routledge, 2022).

psychic rupture where you have to repair the narrative, where there is a cathartic act that comes into that. And then there is somatic body-based trauma theories where trauma is the actual living [out] of the symptoms of the experience in the nervous system. And I think it is all of it together.

And what I think that philosophy and phenomenology especially [do] is allow for these different planes of experience[s] to really interact: You can have the body, and the influences of the body state are of course interacting with the psychic state, which, in Kierkegaard's understanding there is a relation of spirit and the body and the mind for example. They are all connected. This is the prism of being that Merleau-Ponty talks about. Something else that Merleau-Ponty can contribute to the discussion about suffering... We are both disturbed by the world and disturb it. We are experienced by the world as well as we experience it. There is a dual relation there happening. In trauma our relationality becomes so evident. There is a dual relation happening.

Something that keeps coming up in your book is this "prism of being figure" that you mention, and the human being having been touched in many different ways by the world. I was wondering if in your research, what surprised you in the detail of the different theories and ways of looking? If it surprised you that you could or even realized you had to connect all of them?

So, when you spend time with communities of being traumatized what surprised me is this incredible fragility of being yet this incredible resilience. An incredible resilience. You meet people that make you wonder, *how do you keep going?* And yet, even the most delicate action can deeply impact us, and can impact us in our bodies for years and years and years. That is what is so interesting, and that is why trauma theory needs all of these different perspectives because there is something so strange *laughs* and mysterious going on that a person can actually survive and experience joy and can experience a relationship after suffering to such an extent. But then can also continue to live through the affect for this going event for years and years and years and years.

And that is what I get from these different theories. In psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic theory and all these body-based modalities... everybody is saying something different. And then, especially if you are a practitioner you have to wear your modality so well because the person is in your care. So you often get fixated on this one modality. But what philosophy can offer, especially existential phenomenology, [is that it] allows you to draw from these different theories, a laboratory of exploration. Psychoanalysis and internal family systems. Looking at these element[s], and

not looking at that one... Philosophy can explore those interactions without being in a clinic, and go beyond, which arguably is the fault of it because it is argumentation in theory. But that is what philosophy can offer to the trauma experience and work.

The value of a theory of embodiment... what does it contribute to our way of being in our bodies...? What and how can theory contribute in and to our life-worlds?

They are shutting so many humanities faculties because we cannot measure impact, diminishing the humanities' contribution to the public space. What philosophy can offer, and what I love about being the only philosopher in the context[s] that I work in, is, while being confronted with sociological research and looking at the data, one really has to think on their feet about how theory actually applies, and how does my work as a philosopher contribute to this space. And philosophy allows you to see it from a different perspective, especially in terms of phenomenology.

There is a way of seeing the interaction such that I think in terms of embodiment... I was looking at Levinas' idea of suffering and creating an accent from suffering. He knows that it is lived in the body but cannot exactly straighten how it is lived in the body. How do I apply Levinas to this? He talks about the saying and the said. When he talks about hospitality and responsibility. He talks about creating accept. The saying and the said: what is spoken is not the full representation of the human being, they are always revealed to us. And for me, those understandings have informed my work with survivors of human trafficking so that I see them... I create a context of hospitality where it is the overflowing, the goodness, not a sense of hostility and competition. Based on the sense of this understanding of a summon of their humanity: I have a face, they have a face. Simple and maybe more basic readings of phenomenology have a richness that sociology needs.

People are doing this work. That is why philosophy is needed. Philosophy is always interrogating and situating the terms. And interrogating and situating the terms — again bringing Levinas to the table — has an effect on our lived experience.

Often mentioned in your book: Levinas speaks of seeing the humanity of the other person by looking at the face of the Other. What have you learned about humanity of others through your philosophical work, and how would you like to see it used in trauma work? Just to wrap this up.

So, Ula Sigridssen writes about existential health... and he problematizes our experience of vulnerability. Philosophy can offer us a vulnerability of the human situation and the

fragility as well as the kind of paradoxical resilience and the ability to reintegrate, and that that is a relational process. We become ourselves in relation to the other. In terms of trauma work, when you are working with survivors of trafficking... you cannot work by yourself. You need volunteers who work together: social workers, etc.

Philosophy offers this more fluid interpretation of human experience and complexity. It is no surprise that there are systems of power and corruption, because we know the human condition. And yet, we cannot exist in isolation. We have to exist in relation. So how do we engage in these institutional structures in a way that can promote the well-being of people in suffering? Whilst also recognizing that suffering is something that I experience, there is a relatability that the human condition in philosophy can offer us whilst also challenging more reductive ideas and more populist understandings of we all have trauma, we are all addicted.

Now that I am talking about it, philosophy can offer so much! For the complexity of it.