Traumatic Realism

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1. Introductory Remarks

Allow me to begin by locating myself relative to my topic. I was diagnosed with PTSD by a military psychiatrist in 1992. I've never served in the military. Rather, I grew up on the Great Plains of the American Midwest—more specifically, in South Dakota—and arrived at adulthood exhibiting all the symptoms of PTSD. At the time and place, young men who were suspected of exhibiting such symptoms were sent to the local VA for evaluation. Or at least, that is how it went for me.

I begin with this brief autobiographical remark because my topic today has been with me my entire professional life. I am an analytic philosopher by training. I specialize in ethics and moral psychology. But it was psychological trauma—and the questions to which psychological trauma gives rise—that first got me seriously interested in philosophy.

With that in mind, I hope to say some things about how what we know about trauma can—and I think should—inform philosophy. When I was diagnosed in 1992, the majority of the characteristic features of psychological trauma had been identified. But they were not well understood. And they were accompanied by the following notable qualification: "characteristic symptoms [follow] a psychologically distressing event that is generally outside the range of usual human experience" (1980: 236). This qualification has since been removed. By the late 1990's, a consensus had formed according to which the

essential feature of psychologically traumatic experience is that it is psychologically traumatic, but not necessarily that it is uncommon, abnormal, or otherwise "outside the range of usual human experience."

These developments set the stage for a philosophical question which I wish to entertain: What if psychological trauma is a response to a state of affairs that is metaphysically fundamental? To put the point a slightly different way, what if the story told in the book of the world is psychologically traumatic—or at least, is psychologically traumatic for human beings?

2. Traumatic Realism

Let us call the view that reality is psychologically traumatic from a human perspective 'traumatic realism.'

As I will understand it, **traumatic realism** is the view that the conditions found in the actual world fundamentally exceed the parameters set by the affect-laden human mind. Here, I will assume without argument that the human mind is affect-laden. With that caveat in place, I will present two arguments in favor of traumatic realism. The first, ***the argument from human development***, begins with the observation that traumatic realism is true—and is widely known to be true—during childhood. It then proceeds to provide reasons to believe that traumatic realism remains true throughout the human lifespan. The second, ***the argument from posttraumatic aetiology*** provides empirical reasons to believe that traumatic realism is true for human beings simpliciter.

For the sake of convenience, I will refer to a world in which traumatic realism is true as a **not good-enough world**. If the traumatic realist is correct, the actual world is not

good-enough. It does not meet our requirements and is fundamentally hostile to us. It follows that there are important truths about the world and the human condition which are forever beyond our endurance.

I will say more about such implications as we go along. For the moment, let us begin with the argument from human development.

3. The Argument from Human Development

The argument from human development begins with an observation: children trust in a good-enough world. They do so necessarily, as a requirement of the developmental process. Trust in a good-enough world—and hence the denial of traumatic realism—is a foundational condition of childhood. Children cannot be children without it.

Consider the following: children are oblivious to many—perhaps most—of the existential dangers that surround them. That the world is a safe place to grow and explore, for example, is a given (whether or not the world is). That their parents are good people who love them is a given also (whether or not their parents are, or do). These and similar confidences are the bedrock of childhood. The possible contraries are simply too terrifying for a child to endure. As a consequence, traumatic realism obtains in the case of children. Children need the world to meet certain requirements, and they trust that the world meets those requirements whether or not the actual world does.

Now, many of us tacitly assume that this state of affairs comes to an end with the advent of adulthood. But does it?

Here I can only observe that contemporary psychologists maintain that it does not.

According to the basic tenets of contemporary psychology, trust in a good-enough world is foundational not only for childhood development but also in the resulting architecture of the adult personality. This claim is well-established—and widely accepted—throughout the psychological sciences. Support for its truth can be found in nearly all texts concerned with the development and architecture of the adult personality. On Erikson's pioneering view, for example, "basic trust" serves as the necessary foundation of all subsequent development across the life-span (1959: 57-63). Comparably, Bowlby's canonical attachment theory posits successful attachments (that is, relations of trust) as "central features of personality functioning throughout life" (1988: 123). The terminology employed does vary. But the basic claim expressed does not. Psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychoanalysts all maintain that trust in a good-enough world is a necessary condition of the personality, which can never be outgrown.

Here, two points of emphasis are called for. First, it is important to be cognizant that the use of the term 'trust' is not intended to indicate that one must believe that the world is good-enough (on an intellectualist understanding of 'belief'). The kind of trust under discussion is not seen in one's cognitive attitudes, much less in the propositions one endorses. It is one thing to know that dangers exist in the standard propositional sense of knowing. It is quite another— as Karen Jones has noted—to understand that dangers exist in an existential sense, in which one's "day to day experience of the world shaped by a pervasive sense of one's own vulnerability" (2004: 7). Because our trust in the world is noncognitive, one can trust the world while asserting, and believing, that one does not. Indeed, this is all too common. Many people believe that they do not trust the world. And I

submit that many people are mistaken. We inhabit a "climate of trust" that, as Annette Baier once observed, typically goes unnoticed unless compromised or absent (1986: 234).

Second, the potential truth of traumatic realism does not necessarily represent a practical problem. Considered strictly on a practical level, human beings need not concern themselves overly much with the nature of the actual world. All that is required is a good-enough world for us: that is, a good-enough local environment. And there are such good-enough local environments. Some people have the privilege, and the good fortune, of living in one. Regardless of one's personal fortunes, however, the possibility of traumatic realism does arise once one begins asking about the nature of the actual world—that is, about the fundamental human condition. Here, there are reasons to conclude that "human kind | [c]annot bear very much reality," much as T. S. Eliot once noted (1943: 14).

I now turn to the argument from posttraumatic aetiology. The argument is an empirical one, and hence less reliant on the explanatory commitments of the psychological sciences.

4. The Argument from Posttraumatic Aetiology

The argument from posttraumatic aetiology is premised on cases where trust in the world has been forcibly broken. Here we encounter the material reality that gives rise to the philosophical problem.

As the foregoing suggests, our trust in the world is not easily disrupted. Basic trust, once forged, is remarkably resilient. It is not easily shaken. But it can be broken, whether accidentally or by intent. Accidentally, it can be undermined by catastrophic misfortune.

Intentionally, it can be undermined by severe abuse or psychophysical torture. In both cases, once trust has been sufficiently compromised, the affect-laden mind is compromised as well.

The current clinical term for what transpires in such cases is ‘posttraumatic stress disorder.’ Here, I will assume that the basic facts about PTSD need not be rehearsed in detail. The point for my purposes is simple. Central to our understanding of posttraumatic stress is the recognition that human beings are fragile. Deprived of a sustaining environment—that is, placed under sufficient duress—our affect-laden minds break down.

When we break down, one encounters a catastrophic disorganization of otherwise stable features and capacities, both cognitive and emotional. A sense of self which was previously coherent is fractured. Character traits which were previously reliable become disordered. Basic cognitive and emotional capacities—including capacities for thought, memory, and action—fail (cf., e.g., Shay 1994: 165-181). In short, the human capacity for practical reason is undermined, in tandem with the subjectivity of the individual in question. Where our necessary conditions fail to be met, we come up against what Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry once called “the mind’s limits” (1966).

Here, two further clarificatory points are in order. First, in speaking of the “human capacity” for practical reason, it is not my intent to suggest that practical reason *per se* requires a good-enough world. It is conceivable, for example, that beings not subject to our fragility would be able to reason practically in what is, for us, a not good-enough world. The point is merely that whatever may be true of such beings, it is not true of us.

Second, in addressing ‘posttraumatic stress disorder’ it is not my intent to suggest that people suffering from posttraumatic stress are unable to practically reason. Obviously, they are. Rather, the point is that unlike every other phenomenon in the psychiatric cannon,

the condition we currently call ‘PTSD’ has a well-established aetiology—that is, an identified cause. That cause is traumatic experience as opposed, for example, to a psychiatric illness, a disease, or even (properly speaking) a disorder. Traumatic experience compromises the affect-laden mind and its capacity for thought and action. Naturally, a capacity for practical reason returns once safety has been reestablished. Nonetheless, at least for a brief period, one experiences a not good-enough world.

Thus, we arrive at the material reality which underwrites my hypothesis. Human beings require a world that allows for meaningful thought and action. And successful human being trust that they live in such a world. That the actual world is not good-enough is a logical possibility. But it is not an existential one. It is not a possibility for us. And so, insofar as we wish to maintain ourselves and the integrity of our affect-laden minds, we are irrevocably committed to the conditions upon which we depend. In short, traumatic realism could be true. But it is not clear that we would know it.

Let us now turn to two important misgivings.

5. Two Objections

I owe my first misgiving to a talented young philosopher at Cambridge by the name of Cathy Mason. Cathy wanted to know: what kind of knowledge is really at issue? We are not, it seems, speaking of knowledge by description. So, are we speaking of knowledge by acquaintance? It would hardly be surprising if knowledge by acquaintance with trauma undermined human beings. But then, is there really a philosophical problem?

Perhaps, Cathy goes on to remark, I mean to suggest that …

> … even non-acquaintance-knowledge *ought* to be experienced in a way that is deeply affectively significant. Of course, we'd think someone entirely unmoved by knowledge of [traumatic experience] didn't really comprehend it. But we wouldn't expect someone who merely knew [about trauma] by description to have the same affective responses as someone with direct acquaintance. Indeed, it would seem inappropriate for the former to have the same affective responses as the latter.

I think this is a valuable point to raise.

In reply, I would like to stress that I am not saying that knowledge of trauma **ought** to be experience affectively. Rather, I am saying that knowledge of trauma **is** experienced affectively. We are not affectless. And there is a great deal that we will never know, much less understand, if we imagine ourselves to be otherwise.

Recognizing the affect-laden nature of our minds does not erase a meaningful distinction between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance. Rather, it merely requires us to recognize that those who know by description do not know without affect. Such recognitions are compatible with acknowledging that those who know by acquaintance often occupy an epistemic standpoint which is foreclosed to those who know only by description. But my larger point remains: Should traumatic realism be true, there are some important epistemic standpoints which are foreclosed to human beings altogether.

The second misgiving I wish to consider arises in response to my assumption that is such a thing as a "fundamental human condition," much less a (singular) story about the world. Let me be the first to acknowledge that there are good reasons to resist such universalizing narratives. And obviously, if there is no such (singular) story about the world, then there is no such (singular) story about the world which we can or cannot bear. But here I'm inclined to bite the bullet and say that, in this case, there is one. We are narratively

constituted beings. I take this to be a non-negotiable fact about us. And so, it seems to me that there must be a story about the world as it is for us—albeit a story that is told from a human perspective.

Here I'd like to point out that when considering such matters, it has traditionally been assumed that the primary existential problem we face is the possibility that the actual world is meaningless, rather than the possibility that it is fundamentally hostile to us. We have traditionally worried that there is no story, rather than that there is a story and it is awful. Charles Taylor has even gone so far as to suggest that we may tend to take refuge in the former possibility in order to avoid seriously considering the latter (2002: 41-42). I'm inclined to agree. Comparatively speaking, a meaningless world has its advantages. For one, it allows for the kind of aesthetic responses to suffering that Nietzsche and the existentialists favored. As long as one can create meaning where the world fails to provide it, one has options. But we may not be so lucky, as the destructive impact of traumatic experience on our meaning-making capacities notoriously shows.

6. Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, philosophy's defining commitment to the pursuit of the truth comes with a shadow: the possibility that the truth, should it be known, would be unbearable. This problem is not merely a skeptical problem. It is not merely a problem about the possibility of knowledge (although it is that also). Nor is the problem one of nihilism. At issue is not the absence of truth, or value, or meaning. Rather, the problem is one of a qualitatively different kind. The problem is that the true story about the world could be beyond the endurance of the affect-laden mind.

Philosophically, our collective tendency to avoid thinking about this possibility comes at a considerable cost. Human affairs in the actual world are routinely conditioned by psychological trauma. Thus, in not attending too closely to trauma, and the questions it raises, one can easily render oneself ill-equipped relative to human concerns. For example, there are important areas of philosophy—including ethics, moral psychology, and social/political philosophy—where a clear-eyed appreciation of psychological trauma and its implications are essential to responsible engagement. The possibility that traumatic realism is true is thus a matter of no small concern.

Thank you for your attention.[1]

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