

Diversifying Syllabi 2016 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

Article/Essay Title: Outliving Oneself: Trauma, Memory, and Personal Identity

Author: Susan Brison

Readability: Easy

[Note: the article includes graphic descriptions of traumatic events, including torture and sexual assault. Students should receive ample notice of this content before being assigned the reading, they should be allowed to opt out of class attendance if they require it, and there should be no assessment tied mandatorily to this text.]

Thesis: By offering an analysis of how traumatic experiences affect the self, Brison tries to develop a feminist account of self as relational, socially dependent, and interpersonally vulnerable. Brison also argues that the study of trauma reveals that the accounts of self as embodied and narratively-constructed are compatible with the more autonomy-based accounts. On her view, each account focuses on different aspects of the self, but they are all fundamentally relational.

Key Concepts:

Traumatic event: one in which a person feels utterly helpless in the face of a force that is perceived to be life-threatening.

Narrative identity: we constitute our identity through the construction of an autobiographical self-narrative. A central function of spinning and constructing self-narratives is that they enable us to order our experiences, create meaning in our lives, and exercise agency. Our self-narratives also shape how we behave and thus influence our identity.

Brief Summary:

1. Brison starts by discussing how her experience of being sexually assaulted and left for the dead in the South of France shattered her self-narrative and made it seem as if she'd outlived herself. Brison generalizes from this experiences to talking about how in the aftermath of trauma, survivors often lack a self-narrative binding together the different aspects of their lives before and after rape, assault, torture, etc.

2. Brison argues that the bodily nature of traumatic memory complicates a standard philosophical quandary concerning which of the two criteria of identity (continuous body or mind) should be used to determine personal identity: "If memories are lodged in the body, the Lockean distinction between the memory criterion and that of bodily identity no longer applies." The study of trauma presents a challenge to the Lockean view because memory is drastically disrupted by traumatic events, unless, as Brison puts it, "one is prepared to accept the conclusion that survivors of such events are distinct from their former selves."

3. The literature on trauma supports the view that the unitary self is an illusion and that we are composites of a series of successive selves.

4. But how do trauma survivors reconstruct a sense of self after drastically disruptive experiences that can leave them radically altered and unknown to themselves? Brison writes: “In order to construct self-narratives [...] we need not only the words with which to tell our stories but also an audience able and willing to hear us and to understand our words as we intend them.” This aspect of remaking a self in the aftermath of trauma, according to Brison, highlights how dependent the self is on others and why it can be so difficult for survivors to recover when they have no one to communicate their anguish to and when others are unwilling to listen to what they have endured. On the other hand, by constructing and telling a narrative of trauma, and with help from empathic listeners, survivors can begin to integrate their traumatic experience into a life before and after and to gain control over the occurrence of intrusive memories.

5. Thus, Brison argues, autonomy is a function of dependency on others. The autonomous self and the relational self are interdependent, even co-constitutive. Brison again argues for this by looking at the experiences of trauma survivors and the ways in which their ability to reconstruct a sense of self is dependent on how one’s social and physical environment are structured and whether such environments are populated by people who are willing to listen and help survivors regain a sense of autonomy.

6. There is a connection between the views of self as narrative, as embodied and as autonomous. As Brison points out, it is not sufficient for mastering trauma to construct a narrative of it: one must be able to write or say the narrative and others have to see it, hear it, and acknowledge it in order for one’s survival as an autonomous self to be complete.

Possible Applications:

- Personal identity
- Metaphysics
- Autonomy
- Disability
- Existentialism, focusing on how breakdowns reveal the structure of intelligibility
- Phenomenology of grief (in a Moral Psychology course)

Complementary Texts/Resources:

Much of the relational autonomy literature – e.g. John Chrisman; Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stolgar

Elliot Paul on philosophy of creativity

Autobiographies of torture survivors – e.g. Jean Amery (*At the Mind’s Limits*), Primo Levi (*If This Is A Man*)

Stanford sexual assault survivor’s letter (Warning: graphic description of sexual assault, trauma. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/katiejmbaker/heres-the-powerful-letter-the-stanford-victim-read-to-her-ra>)

Derek Parfit (“Personal Identity”

<http://home.sandiego.edu/~baber/metaphysics/readings/Parfit.PersonalIdentity.pdf>)

Possible Class Activities:

Attend or create storytelling spaces to explore the power of narrative in the shaping of the self
– e.g. *The Moth*

Attend or watch stand-up comedy as an example of telling humiliating stories while maintaining control over them

What traditional texts might this text replace?

Descartes, Noonan, Hume, Locke, on personal identity, although it may work better to pair with them.