

## A Phenomenological Account of Trauma, Temporality, and Agency

KAIA HATHAWAY

After experiencing a traumatic event, a person commonly talks about not being able to “move on.”<sup>1</sup> Often, they have trouble connecting with others on a deeper, more personal level. Sometimes, they have a skewed perception of themselves. In this paper, I suggest that taking a phenomenological approach can help us better understand the impact of trauma on a person. After a traumatic experience, their perception of the world can shift and some aspects of the world may seem to be closed off. Accordingly, their agency may be affected in one of two ways: (1) trauma can limit how they engage with the world by closing them off to certain aspects of the world, and/or (2) trauma can alienate them, not only from the world but also from themselves. There may be some parts of themselves that are supposedly inaccessible. How can the person regain their agency and open themselves up to engage with the world in a way they previously did? How can they deal with and overcome these alterations after a traumatic event?

<sup>1</sup> See Simone Marie (2022) and Robert D. Stolorow (2003).

*Kaia Hathaway will graduate from Brigham Young University in April 2025 with a BA in philosophy. After graduation, she plans to eventually attend graduate school in philosophy. She is interested in phenomenology, moral psychology, moral agency, and philosophy of action.*

To explore this issue, I will begin with a discussion of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's conception of memory and how memory shapes the way the world appears to us. I will then analyze the role of Merleau-Ponty's concept of temporality in trauma and how the person's perception of the world is altered. Next, I address the limitations of a person's agency due to trauma. Although these limitations need not always be seen as negative, trauma can negatively impact a person's agency and engagement with the world. Because of this, it's important to understand how they may change their trauma responses to regain their lost agency. I then present Merleau-Ponty's view on habit and polarization.<sup>2</sup> On Merleau-Ponty's view, the way our world is polarized is not a conscious act. Instead, our perception of the world is shaped by our experiences and situations. Since trauma can affect a person's perception of the world in a negative way, I will explore how a person can change how their world is polarized. I argue that using Merleau-Ponty's conception of habit will help us understand how to change a person's polarization of the world. I conclude that a Merleau-Pontyan approach offers valuable insights to help us understand the way traumatic events and alterations in perception can affect a person's agency and, ultimately, shed light on how to deal with and overcome traumatic events.

### Merleau-Ponty on Temporality and Memory

To better understand perception, I will begin by presenting Merleau-Ponty's views on temporality and memory. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes how the past, present, and future are still present to us. Rather than merely experiencing the present, we also experience the past since the present "retains the past that immediately preceded it" (Merleau-Ponty 71). Further, the past is not an unconscious past, and it would not exist if we did not already experience the significance of the past's presence. Suppose in front of me is a partially covered image of *The Starry Night*. The image is visible enough so that I can infer what I am looking at. But it's covered enough that it's not immediately obvious to the person that it is, in fact, *The Starry Night*. Only because I have previous experience with *The Starry Night* can I infer what I am seeing. Without previous experience with the painting, such an inference would not be

<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty uses the term "polarization" to talk about how the world appears to a person. For example, in the case of being a parent, the world will appear to this person in a different way than before being a parent. This person may notice certain dangers that may harm their child such as exposed outlets or sharp corners. Each person's world is polarized differently from one another.

possible. So, on this view, I can't understand what I perceive without my previous experiences being present.

Drawing on this idea of temporality, we can better understand how memories shape our perception. We commonly talk about remembering as projecting memories before us. Some claim that "to perceive is to remember" in such a way that brings back our experience before the gaze (Merleau-Ponty 20). However, Merleau-Ponty claims that thinking about projecting memories in this way does not account for the complexity of our perception. Instead of understanding perception as projecting memories, Merleau-Ponty suggests that memory is always present, causing our past experiences to shape how the world appears to us. Suppose a child burns himself after touching a candle. Merleau-Ponty explains that "the light of a candle changes appearance for the child when, after having burned him, it ceases to attract the child's hand and becomes literally repulsive" (52). The way the child perceives and interacts with candles will change after his experience of being burned.

Although memory is always present (in some sense), this doesn't mean that we are always explicitly thinking about every memory we've had. Even if we can't remember something, our previous experience still affects how we perceive the world, even if we are unaware of our past experiences. On Merleau-Ponty's picture of memory, our previous experiences are either explicitly in front of us or are "on the margins" (23). We still hold the past in hand; it's still there, but it does not show up explicitly in the present. To illustrate the complexity of memory on Merleau-Ponty's picture, let us turn to a case in which a person appears to not 'have access' to certain memories.

Merleau-Ponty presents the case of a man who had forgotten a book, a gift from his estranged wife, that was left in a drawer. Once he and his wife reconciled, he remembered where he had left the book. In this scenario, the man "had not lost the book absolutely, but neither did he *know* where it was" (Merleau-Ponty 165). Because of the separation from his wife, he had closed off his life from her. It seems that "everything involving his wife no longer existed for him" (Merleau-Ponty 165). This is not to say that either the book or his wife did not exist, but rather that neither of them showed up in his perception. The possibility of engaging with either of them seemed to collapse. In this scenario, the man's "lost memory is not in fact lost by accident," but instead, "it is only lost insofar as it belongs to a certain region" of his life that he refuses to interact with (Merleau-Ponty 164). The man "found himself somehow prior to both knowledge and ignorance, and prior to voluntary assertion and voluntary negation" (Merleau-Ponty 165). This is to say that we can be ignorant of something

while also knowing it, although this knowledge isn't explicit to us. As Merleau-Ponty says,

Forgetting, then, is an act. I hold this memory at a distance, as I look away from a person whom I do not want to see. Nevertheless, as psychoanalysis again shows so marvelously, although resistance certainly presupposes an intentional relation with the memory that is resisted, it does not place it in front of us as an object, nor does it explicitly reject it; rather, it aims at a region of our experience, a certain category, a certain class of memories. (164)

We do not perceive memories through a singular series of events, but rather, our experiences are enveloped by what Merleau-Ponty terms generality. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "Through this generality we still 'have' [our memories], but just enough to hold them off at a distance from ourselves" (165). If the man's memory was completely rejected, then it seems that he wouldn't be able to find the book even after he reconciled with his wife. Or, it's possible that he may have already stumbled across the book, but because he closed himself off to everything relating to his wife, he didn't recognize that he found the book. In the end, the man found the book, showing that his memory had always remained and is now once again manifesting itself. After reconciling, everything that involved his wife was now accessible to him once again.

After someone experiences a traumatic event, they may be affected by that event without explicitly realizing it. Suppose I experienced physical abuse as a child. Due to this, I find myself easily startled when someone suddenly raises their arm. Perhaps I do not realize that I'm on edge because I have a fear of violence that can happen at any moment. Simply, I have a reaction without explicitly knowing the reason for it. But at the same time, there is *some* aspect of myself that retains this knowledge of abuse, which leads to me being startled by sudden movements.

### **Disruption of Temporality**

In cases of traumatic events, it seems that a person's temporality can be disrupted and, once again, alter their perception. In "What Is a 'Sense of Foreshortened Future?' A Phenomenological Study of Trauma, Trust, and Time," Matthew Ratcliffe, Mark Ruddell, and Benedict Smith argue,

The experience of time is itself affected. Rather than a change in what is anticipated, arising against a backdrop of intact temporal experience, there is an altered sense

of temporal passage, of 'moving forward' in time, along with a change in how past, present, future, and the relationship between them are experienced. (1)

There are a few ways in which the person's temporality seems to be altered. First, after a traumatic experience the person may have a sense of a foreshortened future. The person may feel unable to "move on," which causes them to perceive the future differently. In some instances, the person can't imagine a future, or they imagine a much-shortened future. In some sense, they can no longer engage with the world in a "normal" way because their sense of temporality has been shifted. The typical person can engage with future projects,<sup>3</sup> such as future careers or relationships, while the person who has suffered a traumatic experience can no longer engage with the future in this way.

Ratcliffe et al. explain that in some cases, "A sense of foreshortened future involves a cluster of interrelated judgments regarding what the future most likely holds, such as 'I will die young,' 'I will not have a family,' and 'I will not have a successful career'" (1). This is to say that "traumatic events are often said to 'shatter' a way of experiencing the world" (Ratcliffe et al. 3). Because trauma can alter one's perception in this way, one may be limited and alienated from some aspects of the world. Some projects (or possibilities) will simply not show up as an option for this person.

In other cases, after experiencing a traumatic event, the person may feel alienated from their past. In "A Phenomenological-Contextual, Existential, and Ethical Perspective on Emotional Trauma," Robert Stolorow presents a case in which one of his patients feels broken and alienated from each of her traumatic experiences. Stolorow's patient explained to him that

With the retelling of each traumatic episode, a piece of herself broke off and relocated at the time and place of the original trauma. By the time she reached my office, she said, she was completely dispersed along the time dimension of her crushing life history. Upon hearing this, I spoke just three words: "Trauma destroys time." (132)

Trauma can alter one's perception of how they perceive the past, present, and future. Rather than perceive the past, present, and future as intertwined, the person might make a greater distinction between each of

<sup>3</sup> Some other examples of projects may include being a student, teacher, parent, spouse, soccer player, craftsman, scientist, etc. All of us take up projects whether we acknowledge it or not. These projects shape how the world shows up to us.

these moments in time. For this person, “Impersonal time continues to flow, but personal time is arrested” (Merleau-Ponty 85). But even though there appears to be a disruption in their temporality, their past experience still shapes how the world appears to them. As Merleau-Ponty says, the person’s “past that remains [their] true present does not move away from them, but rather the past always hides behind [the gaze]” (85). After a traumatic experience, the person’s perception of temporality is still altered from what the “normal” person<sup>4</sup> experiences, but their past still remains, even if their past is not explicit to them.

### Trauma and Agency

Now, what does this mean for someone’s perception of the world? How is their agency affected after a traumatic event? I argue that there are (at least) two ways in which trauma can affect a person’s agency. First, the person may be alienated from the world. Second, the person may be alienated from themselves. Some parts of them may be “inaccessible” to them and not explicit, though their experience still remains on the margins of their perception.

#### *Alienation from the World*

In cases of trauma and the limitations it imposes on perception, certain possibilities collapse, and the person is cut off from certain engagements and projects in the world. The collapsing of possibilities may be most clear through an example. Take, for example, Georgy, who stands in front of me. I can typically choose whether or not to speak to him. Suppose I experience a traumatic event that causes me to lose the ability to speak. Georgy, then, no longer exists for me as a potential interlocutor, at least in the verbal sense. Because of this, I can only engage with the world in limited ways. Given my previous experiences, context, and situation, only some possibilities are present to me. Similarly, in the case of the man losing the book, certain aspects of the world were “unavailable” to him in some sense. He could not engage with objects that involved his wife. So, it seems that, to some extent, his agency was compromised.

The child who burned himself with a candle perceives and interacts with candles differently after his experience of being burned. His world is shaped by his memory and his previous experience(s). In a similar vein, one’s perception can be altered when a person is harmed by an individual.

<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty talks in terms of what the “normal” person experiences, so I will adopt his terminology in this paper.

After such an experience, the way the person engages with the world, specifically with people, will be altered. Some people may experience feelings of “ineffectiveness, shame, despair, or hopelessness” or as though they are “permanently damaged” (Ratcliffe et al. 9). They also may feel as though they are constantly threatened or “socially withdrawn and unable to relate to others” (Ratcliffe et al. 9). In these cases, the person loses trust in future projects and possibilities. So, their agency may be altered insofar that they can’t engage with the world in the same way as the “normal” person.

In “Depression and the Phenomenology of Free Will,” Matthew Ratcliffe discusses a similar situation with depression in terms of “losing one or more projects that are central to one’s life” (583). For the “normal” person, “Things appear significant in the ways they do partly in virtue of the possibilities that we seek to actualize through our projects” (Ratcliffe 583). Thus, in cases of a loss in these projects, one’s perception of those entities and situations does not offer what it once did.

To understand how trauma affects someone, Ratcliffe describes two ways in which the person can be impacted. First, the “sense of there being worthwhile projects and significant scenarios remains, but the world altogether ceases to entice, to draw one in” (Ratcliffe 583). In this case, the person feels unable to act, even though they are aware of the projects available to them. In the other case, there is a more profound loss. The “sense of anything being potentially relevant to any project is gone” (Ratcliffe 583). The person does not merely fail to experience the significance of the project, but they can’t even engage with the fact that there is a project in the first place.

In other cases of trauma, the person may continue to “live in the past,” unable to move on. For example, in the film *May December*, Joe, now an adult, experienced sexual assault when he was a thirteen-year-old boy. As Joe is now in his 30s, we see that, despite being a middle-aged man, he acts as though he is still a thirteen-year-old boy. His traumatic experience put a halt to his maturity and his future projects in some way. Joe can’t seem to “move on” and engage with future projects. Similarly, in the example of the case Stolorow presented about his patient, the woman felt as though part of herself had broken off and was relocated to her original traumatic experience. The woman may feel as though she can’t move on, as though part of herself is still stuck in the past.

#### *Alienation from Oneself*

As we have seen, someone who has experienced trauma may feel alienated from the world. The projects that used to be there are no longer available. Not only do they feel alienated from the world, but they can also

be alienated from themselves. In some cases, they may feel as though the traumatic experience didn't happen to them but rather to someone else. The traumatic experience itself feels alien to them. They may say, "That wasn't me," or "That didn't happen to me." They may distance themselves from the experience to help cope with the trauma. By doing so, they alienate this experience and, in part, alienate some aspect of oneself that experienced the trauma. They may end up not dealing with the trauma because they feel as though it didn't happen to them.

In the case of repressed memories, the person is alienated from themselves insofar as there's part of them that is "inaccessible." Those with repressed memories don't have explicit memories of the traumatic event, but they are still affected by the event. Their experiences still shape their perception of the world, even if they aren't consciously aware. In the case of physical abuse, I can block out the memory of being abused while still finding myself having negative effects from that experience. And as I find myself feeling anxious, it's unclear to me why I'm feeling this way. Perhaps I'm in a safe environment with close friends, and yet I still find myself feeling anxious.

Now, suppose I find myself in an abusive situation, and my once-repressed memory now becomes explicit to me. Now that I'm explicitly aware of my memory again, I could have at least two reactions. I could either work with someone to cope with this experience or deny the experience altogether. Perhaps this memory is too painful, and I find myself in denial, saying, "That didn't happen to me." While I won't further discuss the nuance of self-deception and alienation here, my point is to show how trauma can lead to self-alienation.

*Limitation and Agency: Positive or Negative*

So far, I have focused on the negative effect trauma can have on a person. However, this alteration to a person's perception need not always be viewed as negative. Take again, for example, repressed memories. While repressed memories do alienate the person from themselves, this repression may be viewed as something positive insofar as it allows the person to block out this traumatic experience in the meantime. This allows them to engage with the world without having this traumatic experience lingering over them explicitly. Perhaps the person isn't ready to deal with the traumatic event at this time, so they have repressed this memory. Recall the example of being physically abused. If I repress this memory of being abused, perhaps I may view this repression as something positive or pleasant since I don't have to replay that experience in my head. I don't have the experience



of PTSD that some people may have. So, to avoid having to remember that experience, that memory now becomes repressed.

But, as I mentioned earlier, repressing a memory doesn't completely eliminate the effects of the experience itself. So, one may argue that this alienation and repression is always negative. But by taking this stance, I believe we miss the importance of why someone may repress a memory in the first place. In the case of repressing abuse, it may be beneficial to eventually understand the root cause of some of my reactions. Perhaps remembering this repressed memory would help me better understand why I feel anxious around other people. While this may be true, there may still be some positive aspects of repressing a memory, at least for a period of time. I most likely wouldn't understand how to cope with physical abuse as a six-year-old, so I might unknowingly repress the memory until I could later deal with the situation. As an adult, I might be in a better position to understand the situation. Thus, I think being too quick to view all of these limitations as negative might miss the nuance of how trauma affects a person and their agency.

It's not clear whether something like repressed memories is positive or negative. Alternatively, there may be some aspects that can be seen as positive as well as negative. In the case of the man and the book, there could be both positive and negative outlooks on the situation. On the one hand, the man may be alienated from the world, causing him to lose "access" to certain projects and possibilities that would normally be available to him. On the other hand, this implicit act to close himself off from his wife may help him cope with the situation. Suppose the man and his wife are getting divorced, and he is trying to move on from his wife. Closing himself off from his wife need not be seen as negative in this scenario. It may be helpful and easier for the man to cope if he isn't constantly reminded of his wife while he tries to move on. So, it's not clear that these limitations need to be seen as either merely positive or negative.

### Habit and Polarization in Merleau-Ponty

As I have shown thus far, trauma can alter a person's perception and polarization of their world. Because of this, the person's agency and how they engage with the world may be impacted. But how can someone who has experienced trauma shift how the world shows up to them? Trauma polarizes a person's world in ways that the person doesn't consciously choose. For this reason, it's worth exploring how they can change how their world is polarized.

It's worth noting that not all trauma responses should be completely altered. For example, if I have been physically abused, I may feel fearful around other people. Suppose, then, my aim is to alter my perception to feel less fear in social interactions. It would be beneficial for me to mitigate this fear of danger when I interact with people on a daily basis. However, having feelings of fear while interacting with a certain person may not always be seen as negative. If the person I'm engaging with is dangerous, then my fear would be warranted and would help keep me safe. So, I do think there is a fine balance between having excessive fear around people and eliminating the fear altogether. Nevertheless, I will now turn to how someone can begin to change their polarization of the world.

To understand how to shift a person's polarization of the world, we must distinguish between explicitly conscious acts, mere reflexes, and habitual acts. Some things clearly seem to be actions, such as doing the dishes or going swimming. Other actions seem to be mere reflexes or mere happenings, such as digesting food or body spasms. Then, there are actions that are neither explicitly conscious nor unconscious acts. Take, for example, a concert pianist. After years of practicing the piano, she has gotten to the point where she can perform a piece "without thinking" about it. She is "in the flow," or what Merleau-Ponty calls habit. The pianist has "neither a form of knowledge nor an automatic reflex" but rather a habit that stands in the middle ground between explicitly conscious actions and mere reflexes (Merleau-Ponty 145). For an action to become a habit, a person must build their muscle memory. They do this through conscious acts and practice. Until such actions are habitual, the actions are still consciously intentional. For the concert pianist to gain the habit (or skill) of playing a piece without explicit or intentional action, she practices the piece over and over again to build her muscle memory.

In the case of trauma, a person may aim to change how they engage with the world. Take again, the example of physical abuse. Right now, I perceive people as dangerous. I may believe that people might physically abuse me. But I no longer want to perceive the world in this way. I want to trust people and engage with the world in the way I did before I was abused. One way I may be able to change my perception is through habit. To do this, I first need to consciously act to acquire this new habit. Suppose I want to trust others and not feel afraid of people in most cases. Perhaps I am so afraid of people that I simply avoid social interactions. My first step would then be to have the intentional act of engaging with people. Though it may be difficult, I first need to take conscious actions to engage with others and work toward shifting my polarization of the world. By doing this, I can create new experiences that will help me internalize the belief that not all people are dangerous in the way I previously believed.

Hopefully, over time, I will practice the intentional acts that will build my muscle memory, leading to the habit of engaging with people without having to consciously think about it. As I acquire new habits, my polarization of the world will shift, and new possibilities will open up for pursuing my aims. In this way, I can alter my agency once again to open myself up to projects that were previously closed off. When I develop a new habit, I can restructure how my world is polarized.

The goal, especially in this case of trauma, is for the person to change how their world is polarized by developing the dispositions and habits to see the world in a certain way. They want to perceive the world in a different way that is seamless and takes little conscious action to respond to certain situations. Ultimately, the aim is to change the person's habits (or adopt new habits) that allow their new "projects [to] polarize the world, causing a thousand signs to appear there, as if by magic, that guide action, as signs in a museum guide the visitor" (Merleau-Ponty 115).

### Conclusion

My aim here is to show that applying Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological concepts of memory and habit to trauma can better position us to understand how trauma affects both a person's perception of the world and their agency. For starters, examining experiences of trauma from a phenomenological approach can shed light on how memory, as well as temporality, are altered due to trauma. In cases of trauma, the person's agency may be limited when they attempt to engage in certain projects and with certain aspects that are "hidden" to themselves. They may feel alienated from the world in certain ways and feel as though part of them (or at least their past) is alien to them. But, of course, these limitations need not always be seen as negative.

My hope is that by using a phenomenological approach, we can shed light on some of the ways in which a person can be affected by trauma. Understanding the background behind trauma and trauma responses better positions us to learn how to shift a person's polarization of the world. Merleau-Ponty's account of habit, temporality, and memory illuminates the process of trauma, trauma responses, and how to deal with and overcome traumatic events.

## Works Cited

- Marie, Simone. "Emotionally Stuck at the Age of Trauma: Signs, Causes, and Healing." *Psych Central*, 2022, [psychcentral.com/ptsd/signs-trauma-has-you-stuck#effects-of-trauma](https://psychcentral.com/ptsd/signs-trauma-has-you-stuck#effects-of-trauma).
- May December*. Directed by Todd Haynes, performances by Natalie Portman, Julianne Moore, and Charles Melton, Netflix, 2023.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald Landes, New York: Routledge, 2012, pp. 23-438.
- Ratcliffe, Matthew. "Depression and the Phenomenology of Free Will." *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 2013.
- Ratcliffe, Matthew, et al. "What Is a 'Sense of Foreshortened Future?' a Phenomenological Study of Trauma, Trust, and Time." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 5, 2014, pp. 7-9.
- Stolorow, Robert D. "Trauma and Temporality." *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2003, pp. 158-161.
- Stolorow, Robert D. "A Phenomenological-Contextual, Existential, and Ethical Perspective on Emotional Trauma." *Psychoanalytic Review*, vol. 102, 2016, pp. 123-138.