

Psychoanalytic Phenomenology

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Over the past 30 years of clinical and research practice Robert D. Stolorow and his colleagues have developed the thesis that the post-Freudian shift in psychoanalytic thinking from the “primacy of drive to the primacy of affectivity moves psychoanalysis toward a phenomenological contextualism” (2007, p. 1; see also: Atwood and Stolorow, 1979/1993; Stolorow and Lachmann, 1980; Atwood and Stolorow, 1984; Stolorow, Brandchaft, Atwood, 1995).

In one of his most recent works, *Trauma and Human Existence: Autobiographical, Psychoanalytic and Philosophical Reflections* (2007), Stolorow offers a particularly Heideggarian perspective through which he develops two primary themes: 1) that “emotional life in general and the experience of emotional trauma in particular” are contextually embedded, and 2) that emotional trauma is built into the basic constitution of human existence” (p. 47). Stolorow’s thinking on the first theme offers important challenges to the more normative psychological theories of mental health and healing in that “trauma” and “mental illness” are no longer seen as entities located within a singular mind operating within a singular person. Rather, all mental and emotional conditions are essentially and inextricably intersubjective. Thus, in clinical practice where the clinician is beholden to human healing, the focus must shift from an effort to accurately diagnose what is happening in the singular mind of the singular person, to accurately ascertaining intersubjective spaces that are brought to the clinical context by both the analyst and analysand, and the intersubjective spaces thus created between the analyst and analysand within the clinical encounter.

With regard to the second theme, “that emotional trauma is built into the basic constitution of human existence” (2007, p. 47), Stolorow offers a much more philosophical perspective in which he tries to reconcile seemingly conflictual ideas when he asks, “How can it be that emotional trauma is so profoundly context dependent and, at the same time, that the possibility of emotional trauma is a fundamental constituent of our existential constitution? How can something be both exquisitely context sensitive and given a priori?” (pp. 47-48). Stolorow seeks “reconciliation and synthesis” through “critiques of Heidegger’s philosophy that followed upon the exposure of the depth of his commitment to the Nazi movement” (p. 48).

In the present work I take up Stolorow's two themes described above in order to illustrate, first, how the clinical application of the principle of "context embeddedness" provides a concrete illustration of a communicological perspective (Lanigan, 1988; Martinez, 2003, 2006) whereby a "communicative ethics" emerges as a commitment to the objective immediacy of subjective experience; second, I illustrate how a turn to Merleau-Ponty instead of Heidegger allows for a different, and more adequate "reconciliation and synthesis" in considering how "trauma" can be both an essential aspect of human existence and entirely context-dependent. On both points, Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the "quasi-corporeality of the signifying" (1964p. 88; see also 1981) provides an essential link between speech and the body that differs significantly from Heidegger's notion of "authentic Being-toward death," in which trauma enables one's "ownmost authentic possibility" by shattering "the absolutisms of everyday life...that evade and cover up the finitude, contingency and embeddedness of our existence and the indefiniteness of its certain extinction" (Stolorow, 2007, p. 41). In Stolorow's highly philosophical account we lose the very contact with human embodiment that informs his notion of the intersubjective space of the clinical situation in order to argue for a Heideggerian view of "authentic being." Merleau-Ponty's account of "speechspeaking" offers a very different understanding of "authentic being" which provides a different account of "trauma" as an "experience of unbearable affect" (Stolorow, p.9). Such an account provides, in my view, a much more robust basis from which to understand the experience trauma as something that both takes and gives, and therefore also, a way to articulate a practical ethics of communication.