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abstract

The received view in mainstream philosophy is that violence is an 'act', to be defined in terms of 'force' and 'intentionality'. This approach regrettably and inexcusably tends to prioritise the agent performing the act of violence in question. This paper argues that we should resist this tendency, in order to prioritise the victim or survivor of violence, and her personal experience, not that of the perpetrator. Starting from an analysis of the devastating impact of violence that characterises the experience of sexual violation and its aftermath, based on the memoirs of Susan Brison (philosopher) and Alice Sebold (novelist), we will then proceed to argue that violence should not be thought of merely in terms of an 'act', but also as an 'experience', the difference being that an act is temporally determinate while an experience is temporally indeterminate. With the help of a phenomenological approach, we will argue that violence has time-indeterminate intended and unintended consequences; these are the ripples of violence. Finally, some of the moral, legal and political implications of acknowledging the temporal indeterminacy of violence will be highlighted.

keywords

violence; Susan Brison; Alice Sebold; time; philosophy; phenomenology

introduction

There is a lot more to philosophy than reading philosophy books. Sometimes one can learn more from a work of fiction, or a memoir, than from a scientific treatise. Violence is one of the most ubiquitous aspects of human behaviour, perhaps a defining feature of our existence, and therefore the subject of much philosophical interest. Philosophers interested in understanding violence have a great deal to learn from works of literature on violence, particularly memoirs. Of the many questions that philosophers have pondered about violence, 'what is violence?' and 'can violence be justified?' are the most recurrent (see Bufacchi, 2007, 2009). In what follows, however, we are going to put these questions aside. Instead, we are going to focus on a question that has escaped the attention of many philosophers intent on the study of violence, namely, 'what is the temporal nature of violence?', or in other words, 'can violence be defined in temporal terms, with a time-specific starting and an end-point?' We believe that a temporal analysis of violence fundamentally changes the way we think about violence, and works of fiction and memoirs can be of great help to philosophers interested in understanding the nature and meaning of violence.

Starting from an analysis of the kinds of dissolution of the self that are part of the experience of sexual violation and its aftermath, based on the memoirs of Susan Brison (philosopher) and Alice Sebold (novelist), we will then proceed to argue that violence should not be thought of merely in terms of an 'act', but also as an 'experience', the difference here being that an act is temporally determinate while an experience is temporally indeterminate. Finally, some of the moral, legal and political implications of acknowledging the temporal indeterminacy of violence will be highlighted.

Brison and Sebold on violence

The texts analysed in this section are an academic book of philosophy that includes first person recollection of rape (Brison's *Aftermath*, 2002), a memoir (Sebold's *Lucky*, 2002a) and a novel (Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*, 2002b). These differences in form allow for different aspects of trauma to be articulated, but they are also telling in their similarities.

For months after my assault, I had to stop myself from saying (what seemed accurate at the time) 'I was murdered in France last summer'. (Brison, *Aftermath*, p. xi)

My name was Salmon, like the fish; first name, Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973. (Sebold, *The Lovely Bones*, p. 5)

After writing the first chapter of *The Lovely Bones*, Alice Sebold realised she needed to write her own rape story, before she could properly write her work of fiction. This memoir, *Lucky*, tells the story of Sebold's rape and assault, as an 18-year-old freshman at Syracuse University in New York State, and the subsequent trial and conviction of the man who raped her. In an interview about this work, she says that she wrote the whole memoir first, and then went back and wrote the first chapter. This chapter is a detailed description of her rape over several hours. It is explicit, horrific and difficult to read. Christina Patterson (2003), writing in the British newspaper *The Independent* wrote about *Lucky*, 'It is one of the most shocking books I have ever read'.

That such scenes are largely absent from both Brison's memoir and Sebold's novel, *The Lovely Bones*, is important. Brison does not elide the scene of her rape and attempted murder, but it is not the focus of her book. *Aftermath*, as its title suggests, is focused on what happens *after* violent sexual trauma. It is an analysis of how identity itself, the stuff of personhood, is damaged by such violence. Much of the unsettling charge of *The Lovely Bones* comes from the understated presence of the protagonist Susie Salmon. The horror of the attack on Susie is sparsely and intelligently wrought, which tells us as much as it is possible to hear.

It is important (if almost unbearable) that Sebold places the violent material reality of her rape in the public realm. There are powerful personal consequences for not telling one's story in a context where it might be heard, but what both *Aftermath* and *The Lovely Bones* contest is that this is also not the most important part of the story. Being able to articulate something about the meaning of being violently and sexually wounded, in particular about what it does to time and identity, is also critical for these women. In the preface to *Aftermath* Brison says that after her attack, she is briefly reassured by the professional who tells her of her good fortune not to have been killed, but says she was only able to do this because she '... didn't know that the worst—the unimaginably painful aftermath of violence—was yet to come' (Brison, *Aftermath*, p. x). Sebold in *Lucky* writes, 'Since then I've always thought that under rape in the dictionary it should tell the truth. It is not just forcible intercourse: rape means to inhabit and destroy everything' (p. 131).

Alice Sebold knows about violent rape. She knows in a way no one who has not experienced such trauma knows it. Such knowledge is also the reason why Susan Brison insists on the importance of such corporeal and psychic memory as a tool to inform academic philosophical discourse. In *Aftermath*, she details the prevalent tension within her field, that first-person narratives are a challenge to the status quo of acceptable philosophical discourse. Susan Brison has to address her desire to tell her story as a work of philosophy, because it is not 'just' a memoir. She wants it to be a tool in understanding the impact of sexual violence. Brison, like many feminist theorists, caveats the use of personal experience in this way—in particular dangers about taking such experience as foundational, or as depicting particular groups as victims or aggressors, or suggesting that particular experience is necessarily indicative of general experience. Sebold's memoir is striking in its lack of overt focus on psychic wounds; nor is it explicitly interested in theory. The poignancy of the writing comes in the understated depiction of a lonely young girl, violently sexually assaulted, and then in denial for a decade of the fact that such experience had affected her profoundly.

In Sebold's fictional *The Lovely Bones*, Susie Salmon has been literally butchered, but inhabits her heaven corporeally intact. Sebold's recollection of her own rape in *Lucky* is prefaced by the woman who police officers tell her was murdered and dismembered in the same tunnel in which she was attacked. These counterpoints of physical dismemberment/integrity are differences that tell a story about the shattering impact of sexual violence. Brison's book is sub-titled 'Violence and the Re-making of Self', a phrase indicative of the identity-shattering energies of trauma. Sebold speaks about the long-term process of dealing with rape in an interview with Katherine Viner (2002) in *The Guardian*: 'She says it took 10, maybe 15 years to get over the rape. "A lot longer than if I hadn't intellectualised everything, denied that it should have had an effect on me".'

Susie Salmon does not suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder in either of the ways instanced by Sebold's *Lucky* or Brison's *Aftermath*. This might be because she is dead, but it might also be because she is able to watch and listen to her family for a decade, before she begins to understand that they and she

need to move on. While the caprice of a dead girl speaking from heaven might be the stuff of fiction, there is a truth about Susie's process that rings tellingly with the rape memoirs of Sebold and Brison. Susie Salmon's presence in *The Lovely Bones* allows for an elegiac narrative space to be woven about the impact of grief on family and friends.

In the same interview in *The Guardian*, Sebold says of *The Lovely Bones*, "It's about imagining it's not over when it's over", says Sebold. (Just as, perhaps, the rape victim's life is not over, either.)' (Viner, 2002). What is compelling about this comment in the context of the rape narratives of Sebold and Brison is that violent rape is not over when it is over, and it is this experiential truth that drove both women to write their memoirs, and possibly Sebold to write *The Lovely Bones*.

In the preface to her book *Aftermath*, Susan Brison says that one of the most difficult aspects of her recovery was 'the seeming inability of others to remember what had happened' (Brison, *Aftermath*, p. x). The familial and social networks left behind after Susie Salmon's disappearance are unable to perform such forgetting, because Susie is gone. Susan Brison on the other hand is alive and present to her community. Brison suggests that this tendency to perform radical forgetting around trauma victims is in part the consequence of fear that acknowledging such violence also means acknowledging one's own potential to experience it.

Brison explicitly and Sebold implicitly counteract this tendency to resist listening to traumatic memories by (i) arguing for the experience of sexual violence to have its place within philosophical discourse (Brison), and (ii) writing a memoir that uncompromisingly 'tells the truth' about one experience of rape. In a review of *Lucky*, Sally Eckhoff (1999) says '*Lucky* is just about everything you'd expect it not to be. There's no expedition in search of psychic wounds, no yanking at your sleeve to get your conscience into the picture'.

Both Sebold and Brison are white, educated, middle class and articulately gifted writers. Both were clearly physically assaulted during their attacks (i.e., violence that left physical marks that could be documented and used in court), both went through court cases and saw their rapists jailed. In this sense, these women's experiences have far more in common with each other than with the experience of most rape victims, the vast majority of whom never report their attack, let alone achieve conviction of their rapists in a court of law. Sebold and Brison were able to transform their experience (i) into a scholarly work and (ii) a memoir and a novel.

Brison's *Aftermath* dwells considerably on the importance of finding ways to make a narrative out of trauma as a process of healing, particularly the importance of the 'performative aspect of speech in testimonies of trauma: how saying something about the memory does something to it' (Brison, *Aftermath*, p. xi). This *saying* something about memory as a tool to *doing* something to memory is a key trope in all three of these books. Such saying needs also to be heard by empathic listeners—it is not enough to say it in isolation.

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 highlights the dependency of the self on others and helps to explain why it is so difficult for survivors to recover when others are unwilling to listen to what they endured. (Brison, *Aftermath*, p. 51)

The analysis of the self as fundamentally social, and therefore only mendable in the context of supportive and loving communities, is one of the most important aspects of Brison's *Aftermath* (see also Brison, 2013). But it is also a powerful part of Sebold's non-fiction and fiction books based around violent rape.

Narrative memory is not passively endured; rather it is an act on the part of the narrator, a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self. (Brison, *Aftermath*, p. 71)

Towards the end of *The Lovely Bones*, Sebald gives us 'imaginative access' (a term coined by Brison) to the scene of Susie beginning to tell her story, as she meets George Harvey's other victims in her heaven:

And as Flora twirled, other girls and women came through the field in all directions. Our heartache poured into one another like water from cup to cup. Each time I told my story, I lost a bit, the smallest drop of pain. It was that day that I knew I wanted to tell the story of my family. Because horror on Earth is real and it is every day. It is like a flower or like the sun; it cannot be contained. (Sebald, *The Lovely Bones*, p. 186)

Brison was part of a survivors' support group, and was also involved in the anti-rape movement. Brison speaks about the importance of identifying with others' experience as a way to enter one's own. At the end of her memoir *Lucky*, Sebald talks about finding a similar solace in hearing the stories of her students at Hunter College in New York:

... my students there became the people who kept me alive. I could get lost in their lives. They were immigrants, ethnic minorities, city kids, returning women, full time workers, former addicts, and single parents ... They told me their stories, I like to think, because I never questioned them, believed them utterly ... I was the ear, and the tragic stories of my students' lives medicated me. (Sebald, *Lucky*, p. 242)

Brison talks about the importance of group therapy for rape victims, in particular in relation to anger: 'Rape survivors, who typically have trouble getting angry at their assailants, find that in group therapy they are able to get angry on their own behalf by first getting angry on behalf of others' (Brison, *Aftermath*, p. 63).

Interestingly, this is not a problem that Sebald seems to have. This is her, on entering the court room to face her attacker; 'I let it come now, the thing that had been burning at the corners of my temples the night before, and boiled beneath the surface all that year: rage' (Sebald *Lucky*, p. 180). While Susie Salmon mentions to her fellow inmates of heaven that she would like Mr Harvey dead, there is no overt rage in her comment, only sadness and resignation.

While it is important not to make pat comparisons between Sebald's experience documented in *Lucky* and the fictional story of *The Lovely Bones*, one certainly haunts the other. Not least in the length of time it takes to let grief loose: close to a decade in each case, and only consequent upon stories being told—Sebald in *Lucky*, and Susie's fictional telling of her family's story in *The Lovely Bones*. But also in the desire to make love properly, after being violently forced to have sex. How is it possible to have good loving open sex again—such as Susie manages to have with Ray while in Ruth's body, and also of the kind that ends *Lucky*—making love as if for the first time, in a gesture that kept hope and hell in the palm of her hand. Both Susie and Alice Sebald were raped as virgins, and both eventually find ways to connect sexually with someone in a way that eschews the violence done to them:

Susie in *The Lovely Bones*:

I had never been touched like this. I had only been hurt by hands past all tenderness. (Sebald, *The Lovely Bones*, p. 304)

I held that part of him that Mr Harvey had forced inside me. Inside my head I said the word *gentle*, and then I said the word *man*. (Sebald, *The Lovely Bones*, pp. 307–308)

Alice Sebold in *Lucky*:

The sex that night was short, fumbling. We had gone out to dinner and had one glass of wine. In the kerosene light I focused on his face, on how my friend differed from a violent man. We both agreed later, when we talked on the phone from opposite coasts, that it had had a special quality about it. 'It was almost virginal,' he said. 'Like you were having sex for the first time'. (Sebold, *Lucky*, p. 251)

Alice Sebold's troubled mother depicted in *Lucky*—struggling with alcohol and panic attacks—is absent from Sebold's court case. Susie Salmon's mother, who abandons her living children for half a decade, is drawn with an intelligence and understanding that makes it difficult not to imagine one non-fictional mother haunting a fictional one.

Re-making of selves shattered by violent sexual trauma needs to be done within a community of family and friends, as Brison argues convincingly in *Aftermath*. Interestingly, even though Susie Salmon is dead, this is what happens to her—these are the lovely bones, the new connections made after her death that allowed her to be whole enough to leave them behind. Sebold says about community in *The Lovely Bones*, 'It's about living an extraordinary ordinary life ... People who are living their lives very much attached to the people around them, family, maybe, but also community and friends' (Viner, 2002).

reassessing violence

It is disappointing to see philosophy lagging behind the recent trend that has seen research in the humanities and the human sciences, including law, moving away from a unilateral conception of violence. In particular, the analytical tradition in philosophy seems to perpetuate a narrow understanding of violence, grounded on the dubious distinction between (masculine) active and intentional perpetrators and wholly passive (feminine) victims and survivors, who need to be protected.

Mainstream philosophical accounts of violence focus on the *act* of violence, and therefore on the agent performing the action in question. It is perhaps for this reason that in the literature on violence in the Anglo-American analytical tradition in philosophy, most definitions of violence emphasise the 'force' of the act and the 'intentionality' of the actor. Reading the accounts of violence by Brison and Sebold, we are reminded that there is more to violence than the act of doing violence. But if so, what other way is there to think about violence? We believe there is an alternative to the act-centred approach to the study of violence. We will refer to this as the *experience* of violence. To think of violence as an experience as well as an act profoundly changes the way we think about violence. Above all, an experience is characterised by a temporal indeterminacy. What starts as an act of violence, with a precise starting point and an end point, evolves into an experience, with much broader and unclear boundaries. These are the ripples of violence, which are invisible to standard accounts of violence, but ever-present in the personal experiences of violence recounted by Brison and Sebold.

Among analytical philosophers, one of the most widely quoted definitions of violence is by Robert Audi:

Violence is the physical attack upon, or the vigorous physical abuse of, or vigorous physical struggle against, a person or animal; or the highly vigorous psychological abuse of, or the sharp caustic psychological attack upon, a person or animal;

or the highly vigorous, or incendiary, or malicious and vigorous, destruction or damaging of property or potential property. (Audi, 2009 [1971], p. 143)

In this seminal article, Audi (2009 [1971], p. 138) also suggests that we should think of violence principally as a kind of human action or activity: 'Violence in this sense is always done, and it is always done to something typically a person, animal, or piece of property'. Audi's approach has the advantage of having common sense on its side: an assault is an act of violence; rape is an act of violence; war is an agglomerate of separate acts of violence; and so on. While this is uncontroversial, we must also consider the implications for, and conceptual restrictions to, our understanding of violence, if we think of violence exclusively as an act.

To refer to violence exclusively as an act is not only to assume that there is an agent performing the act, but that the act in question must have a purpose and an outlet. Not surprisingly, we find that most authors on violence focus on these two aspects of violence: the intentionality of the agent performing the act of violence and the force of the act itself. Thus, Geras (1990, p. 22) defines violence as 'the exercise of physical force so as to kill or injure, inflict direct harm or pain on, human beings'; Starr (2006) as the use of physical force that damages the recipient of the force; Honderich (2002, p. 91) as 'a use of physical force that injures, damages, violates or destroys people or things'; and Steger (2003, p. 13) as 'the intentional infliction of physical or psychological injury on a person or persons'; and Pogge (1991, p. 67) says that 'a person uses physical violence if he deliberately acts in a way that blocks another's exercise of her legitimate claim-rights by physical means'.

The emphasis on intentionality and force is understandable. Regarding the former, Jacquette (2013) is probably right when he points out that if it is the act of violence we are interested in, then we must assume intentionality on the part of the perpetrator for violence to be morally relevant. As for force, it plays a predominant role in the definition of violence one finds in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED): 'The exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury or damage to persons or property; action or conduct characterised by this'.¹

For all its virtues, to think of violence exclusively as an act, defined by purpose and outlet, has major implications for the way we think about violence more generally. The standard way of thinking about violence in the analytical tradition in philosophy is extremely narrow, being restricted by parameters that are perpetrator-centred, intentionality-centred and time-specific. To consider violence an experience or phenomenon as well as an act opens us to a new way of thinking about violence.

Violence is no longer analysed exclusively from the point of view of the perpetrator of the act; instead it is also seen as an event being experienced, with the emphasis shifting to the victim or survivor of violence. The reason why violence raises important moral questions is not only because of what it tells us about the person doing the violence, but also because of what violence does to those at the receiving end of it. That is why the works of Brison and Sebold, based on first-person narratives, are not only important contributions to the study of violence, they are much more than that; these works are of great consequence.

Of course, for the purposes of criminal law, it is still important to focus on the agent who commits the act of violence. One does not need to choose between focusing exclusively on the perpetrator or the victim/

¹On the OED definition of violence, see Coady (2009) (see also Dewey, 2009).

survivor. Nevertheless, if violence is seen from the point of view of the victim or survivor rather than the perpetrator, the issue of the perpetrator's intentionality becomes less important, or at least it becomes important for different reasons. Someone can be the victim of violence whether the harm they suffered was the intention of the action, as in most standard examples of violence, but also if someone's suffering was not intended. One of the most powerful and disturbing aspects of Sebald's novel *The Lovely Bones* is how the rape and murder of 14-year-old Susie Salmon not only took her life but also destroyed her family. The family of Susie Salmon were not the intended victims of the violence by the rapist; nevertheless, they were the (unintended) sufferers of the many ripples of the same act of violence. In *Lucky*, referring to her family, Sebald writes, 'I had been prepared for the news of the rape to destroy everyone in my life. We were living, and, in those first weeks, that was enough' (Sebald, *Lucky*, p. 68).

Finally, and most importantly, the standard definition of violence as an act wrongly assumes that violence has a fixed temporal existence, which can be tracked by a starting point and an end point: an act of violence starts when both intentionality and force are present (the intention of harming someone is insufficient on its own unless backed by the use of force), and ends when intentionality and force dissipate. This temporal restriction is undermined once we reassess violence as an event or experience rather than an act: violence starts with the act, but lives on after the act has ceased. Thus, while sometimes it is appropriate to refer to violence as an act, it is also necessary to think about violence beyond the parameters of an action.

The experience of violence is, above all, a social event. Salice (2014, p. 161) suggests that a distinctive feature of the phenomenon of violence is that it typifies a specific kind of social act or action: in performing an act of violence 'one is inflicting harm on the victim with the concomitant intention that the victim becomes aware of the damage and of its "author"'. Salice goes on to explain that at the core of an act of violence is a social relation into which both aggressor and victim enter: 'this relation ... is the perspicuous effect of an act of violence' (*ibid.*, p. 162). What is important about Salice's analysis is that we often think of violence 'merely' in terms of what causes harm, without appreciating the social side of violence. The overreliance on the harm done means that if no harm is done, no act of violence has taken place. This cannot be right: 'Violent acts in this sense are animated by a specific social intention and have a specific social effect, i.e., they intend to establish a relation of "violence" in which what matters is that the victim realizes that the aggressor intends to harm them' (*ibid.*, p. 163).

What we are calling the experience of violence is closely related to the phenomenology of violence. Michael Staudigl explains the aims of a phenomenological theory of violence in the following terms:

At its most obvious level, violence can be analyzed as a destruction of our physical and bodily existence, as well as of its symbolic representations in language and other institutions. Violence, however, can also be analyzed at a more fundamental level. Phenomenologically viewed, it is not only destructive of pre-given sense, but also affects our being-in-the-world, i.e. our basic capacities for making sense. (Staudigl, 2007, p. 235)

Staudigl (*ibid.*, p. 236) proposes that from a phenomenological point of view violence can be seen as being destructive of bodily enacted sense, and therefore as destructive of 'the very foundational ways we are able to make sense of the world'.

Our analysis in many ways vindicates the phenomenological approach. Staudigl argues that violence destroys our 'interpretive integrity', to the extent that we experience a breakdown of our interpretive categories, 'that is, a breakdown for the ways we sustain the stability and meaningfulness of the world we

take for granted' (*ibid.*, p. 244). This is very similar to what Susan Brison tells us based on her experience of violence. Straudigl goes on to explain how violence consists in an asymmetrically imposed restriction or destruction of the primordial 'I can': 'from a phenomenological point of view, a violation consequently consists in experiencing one's intentional openness to the world to be oppressed, expropriated and alienated by another person (or collective agency) whose action imposes relevancies that force the experiencing subject's exclusive attention' (*ibid.*, p. 244).

The advantage of a phenomenological account of violence is that it allows us to elaborate a more robust conception of the self. For example, du Toit (2009) defends a phenomenological model that makes it possible to see rape not as a property crime, but rather as an experienced attack on the very conditions of being a self and a subject in the world.² The merits of a phenomenological analysis of violence are also clearly evident in Bergoffen's (2012) defence of the dignity of the vulnerable body, and the right to sexual self-determination.

The starting point of Bergoffen's analysis is the ruling by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) on 22 February 2001, which in many ways redefined human rights law. In this trial three Bosnian-Serb soldiers were convicted of crimes against humanity for the rape and sexual enslavement of Muslim women and girls. Before this case, human rights law operated on the assumption that the invulnerable body has dignity and integrity, while the vulnerable body has neither dignity nor integrity. The ruling of the ICTY undermined this dichotomy, producing a philosophical and legal paradigm shift: it recognised that vulnerability pervades all aspects of the human body, and the vulnerable body has dignity and integrity. Bergoffen argues that the validation of the vulnerable body has deep implications, and requires us to recalibrate the legal, political and philosophical grounds for human rights discourse.

The phenomenological approach makes it possible to explore ways to make sense of violence that are not limited to an analysis of violence as an act. One main difference between an act and an experience is the temporal implications attached to these terms. An act has both a precise starting point and an end point. The act of playing a game of tennis, for example, starts when the players enter the tennis court and ends when the players leave the court. The act of playing the piano starts when the musician lifts the piano lid and ends when the lid is closed—as famously performed by John Cage's piece for piano 4'33". The act of physical assault starts when the first blow is struck and ends with the last blow. But an experience is different, to the extent that it is much more difficult to delineate when an experience ends. Unlike an act, an experience is perceived. The perception may diminish in vigour over time, but as the works of Brison and Sebald remind us, its traces may never fully disappear.³

In the last analysis, what starts as an act develops into an experience or phenomenon, which means that while the act of violence may cease, the experience of violence lingers on beyond the act; after the act of throwing a stone in the water comes to an end, the ripples on the water carry on.

²du Toit argues that this phenomenological model allows us to detect six elements of damage or loss in the rape victims' stories: (i) spirit injury; (ii) victim complicity; (iii) loss of voice (silencing); (iv) loss of moral rage, moral standing and agency; (v) homelessness or displacement; and (vi) alienation.

³Salice (2014) argues that it is possible to determine the moment when an individual token of violence begins and when it ceases to obtain. He argues that an act of violence is 'predestined', in the sense that an act of violence comes to an end by itself with the end of the act of violence. In this paper we defend a slightly different position, highlighting the fact that the end of the act of violence does not bring the experience of violence to an end.

ripples of violence

In the otherwise extensive philosophical literature on violence, the temporal issue is often neglected, precisely because the scrutiny has been overwhelmingly focused on violence as an act, and the intentions of the perpetrator performing the act. Once this supposition is relaxed, and we look beyond the mere act of violence to violence as an experience, the temporal indeterminacy of violence becomes evident. The works by Brison and Sebold are written from the perspective of the victim,⁴ and detail the powerful and terrible consequences of sexual and physical violation. The enduring aftermath of such violence is a profound part of the wounding done in these acts. If you are a victim, acknowledging this is the only route to healing.

Our aim is to start the process of reconceptualising the idea of violence. Violence starts as an act, but it does not end when the action terminates. For those at the receiving end of the violence, the experience is indeterminate. This is why first-person narratives are powerful, and irreplaceable. The works by Brison and Sebold forcefully make this point. Brison and Sebold both suffered from a brutal act of violence, but it took them the best part of ten years to come to terms with it. In *Aftermath*, Brison explains that violence shatters one's integrity. Her book gives an account of the painful struggle she endured to live with herself after the attack, in other words how the violence persisted long after the act itself had ended. Sebold's *Lucky* is also about the shattering impact on her identity of the ordeal she suffered as an 18-year-old, but most of all it is about the aftermath of the act on her.

From reading Brison and Sebold we learn that apart from focusing on the perpetrator, violence should also be defined from the point of view of the person at the receiving end of the violence in question. The long-term impact of the act of violence on the victim is too often neglected in the literature on violence in analytical philosophy, notwithstanding some notable exceptions such as Brison's work and the extensive literature on trauma.⁵ It is regrettable that the powerful insights from feminist thinkers on trauma and sexual violence have not yet found their way into the mainstream philosophical literature on violence.

In *Aftermath* Brison analyses the impact on her conception of her 'self' of surviving a nearly fatal attempted sexual murder. The language Brison uses clearly suggests that the violence she suffered cannot simply be reduced to the physical harm or injury she suffered. Instead, it is the violation of her integrity, in all its different forms, that perhaps comes closest to doing justice to what she is describing.

For example, Brison tries to make sense of her experience by referring to the self being 'undone':

In this book ... I develop and defend a view of the self as fundamentally relational—capable of being undone by violence. (*Aftermath*, p. xi)

The undoing of a self in trauma involves a radical disruption of memory, a severing of past from present, and, typically, an inability to envision a future. (*Aftermath*, p. 68)

⁴The term 'victim' is problematic of course, but we feel that alternative terms such as 'survivor' are equally problematic. On this issue, and its significance within feminist literature, see Lamb (1999).

⁵On trauma, see Caruth (1996), Rothschild (2000), Kilby (2007).

Brison also describes how the violence she suffered ‘demolished’ or ‘shattered’ her world:

I had my world demolished for me. The fact that I could be walking down a quiet, sunlit country road at one moment and be battling a murderous attacker the next undermined my most fundamental assumptions about the world. (*Aftermath*, pp. 25–26)

When the trauma is of human origin and is intentionally inflicted ... it not only shatters one’s fundamental assumptions about the world and one’s safety in it, but it also severs the sustaining connection between the self and the rest of humanity. (*Aftermath*, p. 40)

In the end, Brison tells us that violence destroys the self: ‘A perfectly good, intact, life was destroyed’ (*Aftermath*, p. 110). What is most interesting about this last quote is that, as Brison reminds us, in order for something to be destroyed, it must first exist as intact. It is precisely this notion of something being intact that the idea of violence as a violation of integrity is trying to capture.⁶

In order to make her point, Brison (*Aftermath*, p. 40) also quotes Herman (1992, p. 53), who in turn argues that ‘the traumatic event thus destroys the belief that one can be oneself in relation to others’. It is interesting to note that in her book Herman also mentions a piece that Sebold wrote in *The New York Times Magazine*. It was only after reading about herself in Herman’s book that Sebold fully understood that many years after her ordeal she was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

In *The Lovely Bones*, Sebold describes the impact of the act of violence on Susie Salmon’s family, particularly on her father and mother, whose integrity is also shattered by the initial act of violence. Unlike the initial act of violence, which terminates in the death of Susie Salmon, the experience of violence cannot be defined in temporal terms, since the ripples of violence that follow from the initial act continue long after the act itself.

in the wake of violence

Acknowledging the temporal indeterminacy of violence is more significant than it may at first appear. From a conceptual point of view it forces us to redefine the very idea of violence; to rethink from whose perspective violence should be defined; and to reassess the worth of first-person narratives of violence. Furthermore, acknowledging that violence is also an experience, and therefore temporally indeterminate, has implications of a moral and potentially legal nature.

Efforts to justify the use of violence almost inevitably appeal to some form of consequentialism, according to which an act of violence can be justified if, and only if, it prevents an even greater evil. Apologists of interrogational torture often rely on this strategy, appealing to far-fetched hypothetical scenarios such as the ticking-bomb argument (see Brecher, 2007; Bufacchi and Arrigo, 2006). Endorsed by many theorists over the entire political spectrum, from utilitarians to revolutionary socialists, consequentialist justifications of violence centre on what Barrington Moore Jr. in 1962 called the ‘calculus of suffering’.⁷ As Geras (1990, p. 27) explains, we engage in this hypothetical calculation in order to evaluate ‘the costs

⁶For a more detailed account of violence as violation of integrity, see Bufacchi (2007, Chapter 2). Nussbaum (2000) also has a useful account of bodily integrity.

⁷See the essays by Audi, Gert and Nielsen in Bufacchi (2009) (see also Honderich, 1989, 2002, 2003).

and benefits of projected or anticipated violence relative to those of a continuation of the status quo'. The problem with the calculus of suffering, as has been pointed many times before, is that in the best of cases it is extremely difficult to make accurate predictions regarding the consequences of an act of violence. Such calculations become virtually impossible once we add to the mix the temporal indeterminacy of violence. The calculus of suffering requires the unpromising task of weighing the expected suffering of the violence we are seeking to justify against the anticipated suffering of the status quo. As if this was not per se a hazardous project, the fact that the 'units' of suffering at the core of this calculation are temporally indeterminate makes the entire enterprise virtually hopeless.

Acknowledging that the experience of violence is temporally indeterminate has legal implications as well as moral. Punishment is based on notions of the wrong being done, and the harm or damage being inflicted. Determining the extent of the harm caused by an act of violence becomes much more difficult once the temporal indeterminacy of suffering is taken into account. Retributive justice starts from an assessment of the harm inflicted. To entertain the thought that violence may be a temporally indeterminate experience has repercussions for the way we assess and measure the harm being done, since we are now facing the impossible task of quantifying an ongoing experience. This is perhaps a reason in favour of restorative justice, the theory of punishment that emphasises repairing the harm caused by an act of violence through a cooperative process that includes all stakeholders.⁸ We are not suggesting that restorative justice should replace retributive justice, but merely that there may be an advantage in finding a space for restorative justice in our society. As Duff (2001) points out, 'restoration' is better understood as the proper aim of punishment, not as an alternative to it.

conclusion

Violence is something that people do. This, perhaps, explains why analytical philosophers writing about violence focus overwhelmingly on the act of violence. In this article we argued that there is more to violence than the mere act. Above all, to concentrate on the act of violence is to prioritise the perpetrator of violence, at the expense of the victim. We think this both narrow and wrong. As if suffering the violence was not bad enough, the victim and survivor is now also marginalised by the scholars of violence.

The limits of an act-centred conception of violence become clear in Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*. Standard accounts of violence assume that an act of violence occurs if, and only if, the perpetrator of violence acts with the intention of causing harm to the victim. The story of *The Lovely Bones* rotates around an act of murderous sexual violence. This act is intentional, as is the harm done to the young girl. Yet it is interesting to note that Alice Sebold chose to recount the details of this act in the opening few pages of the novel, almost as if wanting to remind the reader that the act of murder is only the start of the story rather than its concluding climax. Beyond the act of violence, there is the experience of violence, which is what Sebold's story is essentially about. The same is true for her memoir, *Lucky*. Violence is temporally indeterminate, and the suffering it brings echoes long after the act has ceased. These are the ripples of violence. These ripples of violence are an essential element of the meaning of violence, and to discard them is to miss the point of what an analysis of violence should be about.

⁸On restorative justice, and especially the importance of storytelling, see Miller (2011).

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