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Abstract

This paper entitled, “Exploring Bergson’s Theory of Memory: A Way to Understand PTSD,” explores the symptoms of PTSD through the lens of Henri Bergson’s philosophy of memory. Traumatic memories, flashbacks and recurring nightmares are all symptoms of posttraumatic stress. As remembered events, whether voluntary or not, they are directly linked to memory.

Presentation

[SLIDE 1] Recognize veterans

[SLIDE 2] Today we will be, “Exploring Bergson’s Theory of Memory: A Way to Understand PTSD,” by considering the symptoms of PTSD through the lens of Henri Bergson’s philosophy of memory. [SLIDE 3] Traumatic memories, flashbacks and recurring nightmares are all symptoms of posttraumatic stress. As remembered events, whether voluntary or not, they are directly linked to memory. Understanding how memories are stored, remembered, and forgotten is an important part of how we see ourselves and how we perceive others.

[SLIDE 4] Early theorists, including Aristotle, defined memory as an image storage process based on the perception of time or the past. Aristotle addressed persistent recollection

“especially in persons of melancholic temperament” stating that “the effort at recollection is not under the control of their will...those who throw a stone cannot stop it at their will when thrown” and “the angry or terrified persons (by efforts of will) set up counter motions, but the passions continue to move them on...in opposition to such counter motions” (Aristotle 91). This shows that the problem of controlling memory was considered even in the time of ancient Greece.

[SLIDE 5] Fast forward to Henri Bergson. He was a French philosopher in the early part of the 20th century who started his academic career in the humanities, even though he had acuity for mathematics. In 1927, he was awarded a Nobel Prize for literature. During his career, Bergson produced four major works for which he is remembered. One of these notable works is *Matter and Memory*.

Bergson’s theory of memory is grounded in the idea that ‘pure memory’ is not a thing, that it is not stored or filed in the brain, and that ‘pure memory’ is metaphysical in nature.

- “Pure memory...interests no part of the body” (Bergson 77)
- “Memory is something other than a function of the brain” (Bergson 129)
- “with memory we are...in the domain of spirit” (Bergson 129)

[SLIDE 6] By titling his treatise *Matter and Memory*, Bergson identifies matter as having “no mysterious virtue, it can conceal none” (Bergson 37) whereby ‘pure memory’ has no container and is accessed by a plane of action through perception which is explained in Bergson’s ‘cone’ model.

[SLIDE 7] “Duration is the experience of time passing” (Middleton 62) and Bergson compared it to melodic phrasing. Using the musical metaphor pointed out by Bergson, to experience music “as it is played is completely different from reading the score or hearing the individual notes. Similarly, our conscious experience of time passing, where moments prolong

into one another is entirely different to the retrospective attempt to divide those moments apart and consider them individually. [SLIDE 8] Bergson...insists that duration, as we live it, be considered as an indivisible, continuous flow of conscious states” (Middleton 63). Defined in this way, memory is not matter or an ‘image’ but a constant flow existing in varying planes of duration. In considering memory as it relates to PTSD and its recurring memories, visions, nightmares understanding the process by which the brain recalls or uses memory is important.

[SLIDE 9] Post-traumatic stress disorder or “PTSD is a mental health condition that's triggered by a terrifying event — either experiencing it or witnessing it. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event” (Mayo Clinic). Over time, PTSD has been known as soldier’s heart, nostalgia, shell shock, railway spine, battle fatigue, and combat stress reaction.

Multi-disciplinary resources including clinical, historical, theoretical, and philosophical, as well as personal and semi-autobiographical fictional accounts of traumatic battle events provide a deeper understanding of Bergson’s theory of memory, and how it relates to PTSD and its different forms of treatment. In addition, evaluation of Bergson’s memory theory and other philosophical literature offer new insight into the operations of one’s mind and the minds of those around us. This multi-disciplinary research showed increasing new consideration about how memory works and new ways in which PTSD might be understood and perhaps treated.

[SLIDE 10]) Perhaps the most striking description of and insightful awareness about shell shock, war neurosis, or PTSD is offered in memoir both autobiographical or fictionalized by actual veterans who experienced traumatic wartime events firsthand.

[SLIDE 11] During WWI, “shell shock” was a major concern for battle weary soldiers serving in the trenches of the European theatre and “the incidence of PTSD may have risen

sharply with the arrival of...gunpowder, shells, and plastic explosives” (Melchior 219). Consider that during WWI “in the Battle of the Somme [alone], the British army suffered 57,470 casualties, including 19,240 dead” (van der Kolk 187). [SLIDE 12] Shell shock was considered and discussed by philosophical peers of Bergson, like Sigmund Freud who labeled it “war neurosis” and prescribed that it was best treated through psycho-analysis rather than the established method of physical electro-shock therapy.

[SLIDE 13] Later in WWI, instead of sending soldiers home to recover from shell shock, treatment was “carried out near the frontline” with the “emotional support of their comrades” (Crocq 50). It was determined that “the most natural way for human beings to calm themselves ...is by clinging to another person” (van der Kolk 103).

[SLIDE 14] Our gray matter, the brain is “an electrical device which generates every one of our sensations, thought, feelings, and actions” (Carter 14) and “trauma results in a fundamental reorganization of the way mind and brain manage perceptions” (van der Kolk 21).

[SLIDE 15] “As our understanding of what causes PTSD grows we may find a paradox: distance weapons, developed to...shield troops from the fear and horror of close combat, may in fact cause more trauma” (Melchior 222-223). In the novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, we find evidence of this paradox: “there is no quietness...the droning ...muffled noise of shelling is always in our ears” (Remarque 120) and during this constant assault on one’s senses, it is “strange that all the memories that come have...two qualities. They are always completely calm and...soundless” (Remarque 118).

[SLIDE 16] These examples of memory offering relief are not unique to WWI. In his book *The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien describes similar experience. For instance, he describes how, ‘when a booby trap explodes, you close your eyes...and float outside yourself’

(O'Brien 67-68). Bergson explains that "when we pass from pure perception to memory, we definitely abandon matter for spirit" (Bergson 127).

[SLIDE 17] On the battlefield, memories offer a form of relief or escape. For those with PTSD, "the recollection...is capable of blending so well with the present perception that we cannot say where perception ends or where memory begins" (Bergson 57).

Today, in addition to traditional forms of treatment, relating memories in workshops, writing classes, and other shared venues offer not only therapeutic value, but serve to document important insights into how we view ourselves, our environment, and those around us during traumatic events. If researchers and clinicians examine Bergson's theory of memory and consider the implications of perception and archive in the role of remembering as well as forgetting, understanding and treating PTSD could be dramatically different. Society might benefit from what Bergson can teach us, how we perceive our own memories, and the effect our memories have on ourselves and those around us.