

Body Disownership in Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Yochai Ataria

Body Disownership
in Complex
Posttraumatic
Stress Disorder

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*Dedicated with great love to Adi, Asaf, Ori and Shir
For making life worth living.*

The publication of this book coincides with the fortieth anniversary of Jean Améry's suicide and is dedicated to him and to all those like him who were sentenced to life but chose death instead.

FOREWORD

What happens at the most negative extremes of torture and trauma? What happens to our bodies and to our selves? Yochai Ataria, in *Body-Disownership in Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*, provides analyses of a variety of body-related orders and disorders, with special focus on trauma and the effects of torture. He works first hand with those who have suffered such extremes, and who witness to that first-person experience they lived through, and continue to live through. His analyses are fully informed by phenomenology, especially the work of Merleau-Ponty, as well as by recent science and research in psychiatry. The phenomenological difference between the body-as-subject or lived-body (*Leib*) and the body-as-object (*Körper*) is a basic distinction informing Ataria's analysis. He also builds on a number of other distinctions drawn from both phenomenology and neuroscience—for example, body-schema *versus* body-image, and sense of agency *versus* sense of ownership.

From a particular perspective, these distinctions line up in parallel, where on one side there are connections between body-as-subject, body-schema, and sense of agency, and on the other side connections between body-as-object, body-image, and sense of ownership. With respect to these relations, however, Ataria uses the mathematical symbol “ \approx ,” which means more or less equal or approximately equal. This is an important sign of qualification. These concepts are not equivalent. Indeed, their lack of equivalence and their varying degrees of ambiguity, as well as the cross—and sometimes close—connections between the two sets of parallel concepts, provide them with their explanatory power.

The analyses provided by Ataria are thus nuanced and complex in significant ways. Take for example the distinction between sense of agency and sense of ownership. Each is complex and a matter of degree. Moreover, in typical everyday experience, these two pre-reflective aspects are tightly integrated. It's difficult to pull them apart, either phenomenologically or neurologically. In terms of neuroscience, both experiences depend upon sensory integration processes (some of which are likely correlated with activation in the insula). They involve vestibular sensations, proprioception, kinaesthesia, vision, and perhaps other sensory inputs. The sense of agency also requires the integration of efferent processes involving motor control. In the case of involuntary movement, one starts to see how sense of agency and sense of ownership can be distinguished, since in the case of involuntary movement it is still *my* body that is moving, but *I* am not the agent of that movement (in such cases, no efferent processes are involved in the initiation of the movement). This is the simplest case that provides a dissociation. But in most cases of voluntary action or involuntary movement, the situation is much more complicated, and Ataria explores a number of other complex and in some cases paradoxical dissociations.

The enactivist conception of action-oriented perception—the idea that we perceive things in terms of what we can do with them—is central to Ataria's argument. Trauma leads to breakdowns in this pragmatic know-how that typically informs our perceptions and actions. These are breakdowns in the relational integration of body and world and therefore breakdowns in the affordance structures of our everyday lives. Problems are not confined to just this kind of sensory-motor know-how; however, the problems are equally of an affective nature. Emotion and mood play major roles in constituting our way of being-in-the-world. Across perceptual, motor, and affective dimensions, we find deep transformations in the extremes of the kind of trauma associated with war, violence, rape, torture, and even the slow effects of solitary confinement.

In connection with traumatic effects, one might not think of the unusual experiences of autoscopy, heautoscopy, and out-of-body-experiences, and specifically experiences that have been replicated experimentally both by direct neuronal stimulation and by the fascinating use of virtual reality (this is the important work of Olaf Blanke and colleagues). But this is just what Ataria does. He shows the resemblances of these phenomena, which are seemingly like the effects of quantum indeterminacy, but on the level of bodily experience. Can I really be at two places at one

time, and can that really offer a kind of self-protection; or do they signal a dissolution of self? These are some of the most paradoxical and perplexing experiences possible.

Ataria considers dehumanization in the form not only of being reduced to a merely animal status, for even animals live through their bodily existence in a way that is not too distant from the human; but a dehumanization in the form of being reduced to a mere thing. The inhuman conditions in Nazi concentration camps, for example, resulted in the development of a defensive sense of disownership toward the entire body. The body, in such cases, is reduced to a pure object. At the extreme, this body-as-object, which had been the subject's own body, is experienced as belonging to the torturers and comes to be identified as a tool to inflict suffering and pain on the subject himself. In this situation, robbed of cognitive resources, the subject may have no other alternative than to treat his body as an enemy, and accordingly, retreat, or disinvest from the body. This kind of somatic apathy is an indifference involving a loss of distinction between the self and the nonself. It too often leads to suicidal inclinations, even after liberation from the camp.

Ataria thus explores, *the mind's limit*, to use a phrase from Jean Amery. He follows a route that leads the mind to a dead end in the body, taken as pure object. The body, which is not other than the mind, comes to be so, and so alien, through torture and specific kinds of trauma. Such experiences have the potential to destroy all aspects of self: the physical, the experiential, the cognitive and narrational, and the profoundly inter-subjective. The question then is: What is left? What resources might the subject use to recover? That's a challenge that many victims and survivors face, and it is well worth trying to understand.

Memphis, USA

Shaun Gallagher

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*

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BOOK ABSTRACT

Severe and ongoing trauma can result in impairments at the body-schema level. In order to survive, trauma victims conduct their lives at the body-image level, thus producing a mismatch between body-schema and body-image. In turn, as in the case of somatoparaphrenia and BIID, this incongruity can result in body-disownership, which constitutes the very essence of the long-term outcomes of severe and ongoing trauma.