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Shocking Others: a Phenomenology of Emotional Shock and Political Polarization

Pierrick Simon
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3357-0070

This article uses the phenomenological method to explain the emotion of shock, which is at the heart of political polarization. It answers the following question: what is this often paradoxical feeling of disbelief that we feel when we find something shocking, and why does it make people strangers to one another? Unlike other existing conceptions of shock (Stockdale, Osler), we employ the phenomenological framework of Lorelle's "traumatic experience" to make explicit the positive aspect of shock: showing how shock is an experience in itself and not merely a failure to assimilate experience. The conclusion reached is that surprise should not be seen as always a passive acknowledgment of the gap between our expectations and reality; instead it should be fully recognized as an active force. Thus, disbelief can be a moral standard that asserts itself and imposes an aura of strangeness on the people we disagree with.

Keywords: surprise, shock, disbelief, trauma, otherness, strangeness, indignation, outrage, phenomenology, polarization, Levinas

Introduction

When faced with certain behaviors, events, or utterances that strike us as inappropriate, we can feel utterly shocked. One puzzling feature of this emotional response is the feeling of disbelief it can induce. How is it that shock seems so

PIERRICK SIMON, Master's degree, Independent Researcher; e-mail: lemiroirtranquille@outlook.fr

readily expressed by the phrase "I cannot believe it!"? There are many things that we do not believe, without feeling rattled by this non-belief. Whereas, with shock, disbelief manifests itself as a strangeness that colors the shocking event. We feel alienated from the event, unable to understand it. Yet we do relate to it in a sustained way, as opposed to the myriad of things we do not believe without feeling any particular way about it. One way we can relate to the shocking event is with anger. "Indignation" and "outrage" are words that can designate the disbelief of shock when anger is added to the mix. Then, the inappropriateness of the shocking event is that of an offense, and what we feel alienated from includes the offender. "What were they thinking?!" we might ask, while contemplating their deed. Here again, disbelief is a puzzling reaction, since we sometimes have a pretty good idea of what they were thinking, without this knowledge necessarily assuaging our state of shock. Any philosophical curiosity that we might have about this characteristic of shock is compounded by what might be at stake, when it comes to indignation. Indeed, the details of what this emotional response of shock entails matter greatly, given its potential connection to the affectivity of political polarization,[2] a process through which individuals get estranged from one another along political lines, and which is reputed to make political discussions mediocre. Couldn't this estrangement be the strangeness felt in indignation? This poses an interesting problem. How does disbelief manifest in the state of shock? What are its implications? I believe that a phenomenological approach is best suited to honor the paradoxes that might emerge out of the weirdness of disbelief. Indeed, phenomenology reliably challenges the usual dichotomies i.e., reason and passion, fact and value, self and world, self and others, etc. that make up those paradoxes. In producing a phenomenological description of shock, I will heavily lean on two great accounts of this phenomenon, produced in a similar vein: the way Katie Stockdale describes "moral shock"[3] and the way Lucy Osler describes "indignation"[4] as angry disbelief. I aim to build upon their hypotheses, by defending the

[2] Shanto Iyengar et. al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States," *Annual review of political science* 2019, vol. 22: 129–146. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034

[3] Katie Stockdale, "Moral Shock," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 8, no. 3 (2022): 496–511. https://doi.org/ 10.1017/apa.2021.15

[4] Lucy Osler, "WTF?! Covid-19, indignation, and the internet," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 2023, vol. 22: 1215-1234. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-023-09889-z

"traumatic experience" theoretical framework developed by Paula Lorelle. Lorelle describes how being prone to shock can be a structural trait of experience.[5] However, since all those accounts have the quality of being conversation-starters pertaining to under-theorized emotions, I shall make my proposals in the same spirit. Therefore, I hope that the proposed improvements will not be seen as dismissive criticisms, but as building blocks that can help us further the discussion and delineate properly an area of study regarding emotional shock and disbelief. To accomplish this, I would like, first, to clarify the link between shock and the feeling of strangeness of what we perceive as shocking. I shall do that by leaning on Katie Stockdale's description to explore the puzzle of shock and surprise. Secondly, I will show why Paula Lorelle's phenomenological theory is needed to account for how shock and surprise can be of the same cloth. Thirdly, I would like to propose a way to think about how all of this relates to the notion of political polarization. I will do that by discussing Lucy Osler's article, and the implications of indignation being theorized as angry disbelief.

Surprise, Shock, and Disbelief

Katie Stockdale's article, *Moral Shock*, can be read as an exploration of the saying "I am shocked, but I am not surprised." How can we make sense of this phrase, given that it is tempting to think of shock as an instance of extreme surprise? Stockdale argues that shock is distinct from surprise as it is traditionally conceived because it is possible to be shocked even when what shocks us confirms our expectations. For example, we might know that someone is going to say something hateful, and yet be shocked when we actually hear them utter the words.[6] Thus, if we conceive surprise as we usually do, which is as a breach of expectation, then shock doesn't necessarily involve surprise. It *can* involve surprise, and it often does, but it does not have to. Stockdale proposes that we are shocked by an

[5] Paula Lorelle, "L'expérience traumatique: Emmanuel Levinas et Claude Romano," in: *La raison et l'événement, autour de Claude Romano,* ed. Philippe Cabestan (Paris: Le Cercle Herméneutique, 2016), 47–71. https://www.academia.edu/36757948/Lexp%C3%A9rience_traumatique_Emmanuel_Levinas_et_Claude_Romano (pages cited accordingly) (accessed: January 30, 2023).

[6] Stockdale, "Moral Shock," 496-497.

event, not to the extent that it was unexpected, but to the extent that we were not emotionally prepared for it.[7] She describes shock as an experience of intense bewilderment. What that means is that our sense of reality is disrupted[8] – our sense of how the world is or should be. We do not know how to make sense of what we witnessed, which we often express as incredulity and as curiosity. Nor do we know how to respond to it, finding ourselves at a loss for words.

All of this leaves open the possibility that it is our usual conception of surprise which is to fault for the disconnect between shock and surprise. If the way we usually think about surprise is inadequate, then it is possible, even probable, that shock is indeed a form of surprise, as long as the latter is understood in the right way. The experience of utter shock could then count as an objection to the standard model of surprise (and to any *ad hoc* amendment to the usual model, which would posit that "an element of the unexpected"[9] is still present in the fine details of the event). Stockdale is open to this possibility, but wonders what that would mean with regard to the very telling saying "I am shocked, but not surprised," which would then sound puzzling (would surprise *transform* into shock, an emotion of a different quality?).[10] I would like to propose that letting the experience of shock teach us about the nature of surprise is the proper way forward. Let's notice two features of Stockdale's account that hint at this path forward.

First of all, she focuses a lot on the paralysis that comes with shock: the subject cannot process the event in real time, or respond to it in a timely manner. As a result, it is a very *negative* description of shock. Not negative in the sense of "overly pessimistic", but negative in the sense that it is a description of what is missing, as opposed to what actually is there. While it is true that the subject's ability to make sense of things is challenged, and that they feel very frustrated by it, and while it is also true that this frustration (delayed response, attenuated initial response, etc) is philosophically interesting,[11] let us not miss the fact that when the

[7] Ibidem, 504.

[8] Ibidem, 503.

[9] Ibidem, 502.

[10] Stockdale told me this in private correspondence, on 09/11/2022, when I asked her to clarify if she meant that shock was distinct from surprise or if she meant that it was distinct from surprise as philosophers (mis)characterize it. She confirmed that she wanted to leave the question open to make room for the latter.

[11] See ibidem: 507; "The Significance of Shock to Moral, Social, and Political Life."

subject does rise to the challenge, *if they do*, they end up producing something new.[12] Emotions ought to be understood on their own terms, and not based on our frustrations. Therefore, a proper description of shock is a description which includes the positive gain it brings about.

Second of all, let's understand Stockdale's rhetoric. Her reasoning relies on examples of what we might call "paradoxical surprise": when we seem surprised, even though we have *arguably* no reason to be. Hence the phrase "I am shocked, but not surprised," a saying which keeps the paradox well and alive. Maybe the reliance on paradoxical surprise hints at the fact that we should link shock back to surprise, while finding a way to honor the paradox, *without getting stuck in it*. The way to do that, it seems to me, is to connect those two dots that I just described. This paradoxical surprise *is* the positive gain of shock. Indeed, what is paradoxical surprise, if not "othering"? "Otherness" understood as an active process. On the naïve view, "otherness" pre-exists perception of the entities read as "others," and the feeling of strangeness does nothing but sanction this state of affairs: they feel strange *because* they are strangers. But, upon reflection, we can realize that it works just as much the other way around, and that our feeling of strangeness builds up a situation just as much as it witnesses it. "Otherness" has an active dimension, which is the work that we do to make certain individuals feel strange to us. We hype up individuals as mysterious and exotic. We repudiate and dehumanize people who were once living with us. We actively turn the familiar into the unfamiliar. Notice that this is exactly the role that "paradoxical surprise" performs as a notion: it marks things as outliers, without the strict constraint of the "strange" actually having been *previously unknown*. The virtue of shock is, therefore, this power to renegotiate what ought to count as strange and surprising. It grants us the ability to perceive something as strange even if that something was not always so strange to us. So, while shock is not *essentially* distinct from surprise, it is pushing the envelope in some way that inspires us to talk about it as if it were.

[12] The most positive trait of moral shock that Stockdale describes is that it may "lead to vivid memories which figure prominently in our narratives about moral life". It is precisely this sort of phenomenon that I think should be accounted for (ibidem.)

Perhaps another paradoxical phrase should guide us: "I was not expecting anything, and yet I am still disappointed."[13] Can this idea make sense? On the standard model of surprise, it does not. If we conceive surprise as a breach of expectation, this disappointment that the subject might feel is a "telling betrayal"[14] that they expected something else. But I think that it is possible to be shocked by something in such a way that the felt-contrast is not a comparison with what we had imagined was about to happen. The comparison is between what happened and a certain standard that we have. The proper phenomenological question then becomes: *how* do we have this standard? How do we *have it*, if not as a conscious or unconscious future-oriented expectation that precedes the contrast? How can it not be an expectation, if it is so naturally expressed as expectations or disappointments? When trying to honor a paradox, we have to make sure that we are not making room for an absurdity. Accordingly, we must give ourselves a plausible theoretical framework, that would make sense of the possibility of having a standard that is not necessarily an expectation. This framework will then, obviously, get contrasted with Stockdale's idea that our "sense of reality" can be a non-anticipatory standard, which can be breached, but which isn't entirely made of expectations.

The Traumatic Experience Framework

What do we need to account for exactly? If our interpretation of the examples of shock is correct, we need a framework that makes sense of the idea that surprise does not have to be a contrast between what happens and future-oriented expectations we had before the event (consciously or unconsciously), which were presumably laying the groundwork for the "disappointment." The first requirement is to establish a breachable standard that is not necessarily an expectation. Yet, we also need to explain why breached standards are so readily expressed as expectations. Not only that, but those standards are also *expectation-like*, in that they clearly derive from a contingent history of the subject's life. The delineation

[13] Inspired by the quote "I expect nothing, and I'm still let down" in Linwood Boomer, *Malcolm in the Middle*. Season 6, episode 5, "Kitty's Back."

[14] Daniel Dennett, "Surprise, surprise," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 24, issue 5 (2001): 982. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X01320113

of shocking objects of attention might take place with relative disregard for our anticipations, but it clearly takes place within the contingent history of what our beliefs happen to be at the time. It seems then, that what is required of us is a balancing act. This is the second requirement. A breachable standard should not be the obvious flip side of a subject's project, nor should it have nothing to do with a subject's project. It needs to be transcendent and perennial enough to rise above the timeline of our projects, interrupting the course of our routine to assert its truth without reference to what is currently on our mind. But it needs to be mundane and projective enough to be expressed as such and to tell us what is worth paying attention to base on our beliefs at the time.

These requirements are taken up by Paula Lorelle when she describes traumatic experience.[15] Specifically, her interest is to sketch a theory that shows how the possibility of *trauma* should influence our phenomenological understanding of experience itself. She argues that this requires more than to describe trauma from the point of view of the *recovery from trauma* (whether failed or successful). The recovery perspective has the unfortunate consequence of reducing trauma to a negation of experience, as opposed to seeing trauma as an experience that can be described for its own sake**.** She fulfills our first requirement (a breachable standard is not necessarily an expectation) by taking into account an idea developed by Emmanuel Levinas. The possibility of shock is a structural feature of experience. Levinas pointed out that alterity cannot be true alterity when it is the mere correlate of a subject's projection forward, their anticipatory schemas.[16] Indeed, true alterity is challenging. Whereas anything that is merely the flipside of a subject's project cannot truly challenge them. The *a priori* correlation acts as a guarantee that the ride won't be too bumpy. Thus, we ought to describe a kind of passivity, of surprise, that cannot be inverted into a relationship of mastery. Meaning: which cannot get re-described as a reason to think that a subject could be ready for anything that is thrown their way, given enough preparation. To be sure, there are exceptional events that we can never be ready for, but the point here is that we are *always* vulnerable to shocks, even when things go our way. Exceptional events only reveal a structural vulnerability that is always there, and

[15] Lorelle, "L'expérience traumatique: Emmanuel Levinas et Claude Romano," 47–71.

[16] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'extériorité*, 14th ed. (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1971).

which is inherent to experience. Any mastery that we might develop against that background is relative. Expectations and projects are manifestations of such relative mastery. For all our best-laid plans, we can always be reminded of the standards that we helplessly hold.

But what standards are revealed then? As Paula Lorelle points out, within Levinas' philosophical system, the standard thus revealed is the idea of God.[17] This would not be a problem, if not for the fact that this answer neglects to account for real-world traumas, as it accounts only for the archetypal trauma of being awed by the face of God. As Lorelle writes: "If, on the one hand, this constitutively traumatized subjectivity is none other than «sensitivity» for Levinas – meaning, subjectivity, strictly speaking – everything, on the other hand, points to the idea that sensitivity is at stake only beyond or beneath the world proper".[18] To make vulnerability central is something that should lead to an explanation of actual traumas. Otherwise, Levinas is using the motif of trauma in a purely allegorical way. Lorelle concludes that trauma should be described as an "authentic modality of our relationship to the world."[19] The peril inherent in experiencing anything at all, the fact that we can be struck by an event that devastates all future experiencing, is an essential structure of experience itself[20].

Thus begins the balancing act that I described as our second requirement. What we gain in perenniality when we follow Levinas, we lose in concreteness if we do not immediately translate it into mundane terms. Lorelle specifies her framework by insisting on the fact that the lesson imparted by our "traumatizability," so to speak, has to be applied immediately. Our world has to be re-conceived as a world which can get shattered by shock, it has to be re-conceived as a place where we sometimes cannot do things and sometimes cannot master things.[21] This may sound trivial, but it isn't. As we saw earlier, when I began describing shock, to describe powerlessness positively, as an achievement, with prospects of its own, does not come to us very intuitively, as our concepts often take

[17] Lorelle, "L'expérience traumatique: Emmanuel Levinas et Claude Romano," 15.

[18] Ibidem, 15: "Si d'un côté la subjectivité constitutivement traumatisée n'est autre chez Levinas que «sensibilité» — que la subjectivité sensible à proprement parler — tout se passe pourtant comme si la sensibilité se jouait au-delà ou en deçà du monde à proprement parler."

[19] Ibidem: "une véritable modalité de notre rapport au monde."

[20] Cf. ibidem, 16.

[21] Ibidem, 21.

their cue from our frustrated projects. *We would rather describe the experience of shock negatively, as a failure to assimilate the object into the realm of experience, rather than positively, as an experience of alienating the object.* To be sure, surprise is the referee of our fundamental sensitivity and vulnerability, but rather than merely expressing perennial and immutable standards deep within ourselves, it has all the history, contingency, and positivity, of the work we do to alienate certain objects.

We now see how to reunite shock and surprise. How far have we strayed from Stockdale's idea that our "sense of reality" can be this breachable standard that doesn't need to be interpreted as a set of expectations? It is hard to tell, because it all boils down to her notion of "emotional preparation," which she does not flesh out much. It seems plausible that we are most shocked when we find ourselves in the midst of a situation that we were not prepared for emotionally. To be intellectually or logistically prepared for the challenging event seems indeed insufficient. We can *know* that a challenge is coming, and yet not be prepared for it. At the same time, for all its plausibility, this idea feeds on the gap between shock and surprise that I am aiming to bridge. The phrase "I am shocked, but not surprised" could be paraphrased as "I was not emotionally prepared, so I am shocked, even though I was intellectually prepared, so I am not surprised." So what should we do with this notion? As it is presented, it runs the risk of deriving its appeal from a confused separation of emotions and intellect, and of body and mind. We ought to honor the fact that conceiving of a challenge is not enough to give us the skills necessary to tackle it, without resorting to the idea of a divide between passion and reason. Thankfully, our "traumatic experience" framework gives us the tools we need for that.

Trauma is an experience that has to be understood on its own terms. Once again, we have to describe the situation of felt-inadequacy, not just negatively, as a *lack* of emotional preparation, but positively, by looking at what is actually there, which fuels the feeling of inadequacy. In the situation of shock, we feel *a calling to do the right thing*. This is what precipitates loss of means and loss for words. The reason why we feel like we cannot do *anything* is because we feel compelled to offer *only* the right response. This is grounded in a moral calling. Which is to be

expected since shock is to be traced back to our fundamental sensitivity. This sensitivity is a vulnerability, which is the crucible of morality.[22] Indeed, what does it mean to heed the moral call? It is to tend to vulnerability. If shock delineates an expectation, it is only an "expectation" in the sense that we could say "I expect you to do better," holding people accountable vis-a-vis moral standards. It is an expectation nonetheless, in its own way, which explains why shock is readily expressed as such. At the same time, the moral call is not always heeded in the wisest way as it is subject to interpretation. So while it is true that to prepare someone for a shocking event, you have to prepare them "emotionally," it is helpful to notice that this preparation is often about helping them to put limits on that calling, to make this ethical motivation more grounded in reality. For instance, if you coach someone on how to answer a racist comment, you will probably have to teach them first, that they do not need to reply very fast with a biting and witty retort, or with a passionate and eloquent speech about the injustice of racism. It takes training to notice that those demands that you put on yourself are not the best interpretations of the moral call. It might take bodily training,[23] as Stockdale pointed out. But if we do not want to create a dichotomy between body and mind, we have to express its logic (the right posture manifests that you do not have to prove yourself, etc).

There will, therefore, always be an unbreakable solidarity between "being at a loss," and "gaining a moral standard," and determining the boundaries of a shocking object of attention. The insecurity, the demand, and the breach. How do these three parameters manifest in the context of political polarization?

Indignation as Angry Disbelief

Having clarified the connection between shock and surprise, having shown that the disbelief of shock is the active process of "othering," which is what happens when surprise goes beyond sanctioning the gap between our expectations and reality, and instead creates strangeness to mark our renewed expectations, we

[22] Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, 10th ed. (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1978).

[23] Stockdale, "Moral Shock," 505.

are now well on our way to finding a link between shock and political polarization. However, we are not quite there yet. A happy piece of news could shock you, and your numb happiness could be expressed as "I don't know what to say. I'm so shocked." It is not exactly what we have in mind when we think of the shocks of political life. We need to figure out what the indignation variant of shock is.

As Lucy Osler argues, indignation is often discussed in relationship to anger, and it tends to downplay its prominent feature of surprised disbelief.[24] When indignant, we will exclaim "I cannot believe they just did that!" or some equivalent sentiment. Having explored the relationship between shock and surprise, we are now acquainted with the paradoxes that can arise from this feeling. We would no longer regard it as absurd if someone exclaimed "I knew they were going to do that, and yet I cannot believe they just did!" We would regard it as the expression of the active side of disbelief. Osler's description of indignation is of great quality, and picks out the surprise feature very astutely in many ways, but it is perhaps too determined by the standard model of surprise to honor those paradoxes. She considers surprise to reveal one's actual expectations (either explicit or tacit, either detailed or general.)[25] For instance, she claims: "It sounds odd to say that I feel indignant that one of my partners is late, when I fully expected them to be so because they are always late. I might be frustrated, annoyed, or enraged in this situation, but it seems odd to describe this as leading to indignation."[26] It does sound odd, yet shock does arise!

This (perhaps provisional) feature of Osler's account has some repercussions that are of interest to us. She states that indignation is one of the "cooler"[27] emotions of anger, in the sense that it does not seem to have the immediate proclivities for destructive wrath. For Osler, indignation is directed towards the offense that was witnessed, and not the offender. And the way she explains that limited reach is by appealing to what can logically count as going against our expectations. Indeed, she first writes "Note that the disbelief felt is not a disbelief that the occurrence has actually happened (it is not doubting the occurrence of the offence) but a disbelief that it could have happened" and then later connects the dots by writing: "This, I think, helps explain why indignation is primarily directed

[24] Osler, "WTF?! Covid-19, indignation, and the internet," 1216.

[25] Ibidem, 1224.

[26] Ibidem, 1223.

[27] Ibidem, 1221.

at the offence not the offender(s), because what begs our belief is that the offence happened at all, that its occurrence does not sit comfortably with our broader idea of how we take the world to be."[28] Her framework is bound to a narrow range of what can logically count as surprising, because, for her, surprise can only be a breach of expectations we hold (tacitly or explicitly). Thus, it is not surprising that she regards the offender as not targeted by indignation: the same way it would be a bit absurd to say that there is disbelief that the offense *actually* happened, it would sound a bit absurd to say that we are in disbelief that the offender… exists? It is hard to put into words what that disbelief would be, and yet we feel it when we ask "Are you for real?!" or "Are you serious?!" Instead, Osler defends the idea that the disappointment is about the "broader idea of how we take the world to be." But doesn't that only dilute exactly this feeling of indignation that we can have towards a person? Why transform "how could you?" into "how could this happen in general?" There is no reason to assume that indignation cannot be more pointed than that.

To be fair, Osler does not rely too much on such dilutions. She recognizes cases of paradoxical disbelief in two instances. The first is when she hypothesizes that "a more common case might be that even in the face of certain moral offences, we might fail to assimilate the occurrence of such offences into our understanding of what the world is like."[29] A failure to update our beliefs explains why we act surprised, when we arguably shouldn't be. The second is when she grants that it might be productive to hold onto our incredulity, in order to signal that we expect better of people[30]. Failing to update our beliefs and lose our indignation might be a good thing. I think it is probably better to combine those ideas more explicitly. If those two things are true, then why not acknowledge that the failure to assimilate moral offenses is, in some sense, also an achievement. Osler already thinks of the "achievement" of indignation when she argues that it is a tool to disclose one's moral values,[31] but she says the disclosure is either of naïve expectations (the person genuinely didn't know the offense was possible) or of idealistic expectations (the person is being falsely naïve). One example she gives is how Greta Thunberg

[28] Ibidem, 1223-1224.
[29] Ibidem, 1224.
[30] Ibidem, 1230-1231.
[31] Ibidem, 1225-1228.

holds onto her incredulity to produce a certain political effect.[32] I would argue that, in fact, it is not just that we can, counter-intuitively, hold onto indignation as an idealistic political strategy. Rather, it is that we already find it pretty intuitive to do so. Osler writes "It is difficult to harbour indignation, for the very process of harbouring our afront can prompt a reassessment of how we take the world to be, leading to the evaporation of our disbelief." As a result indignation "is typically a short-lived emotion, whereas other forms of anger, such as resentment, might be emotions that we can hold onto for a long time."[33] If indignation depended upon a breach of expectations, it would logically evaporate as quickly as our expectations update. Therefore, it is telling that, contrary to what Osler claims, indignation is surprisingly easy to hold onto. Indignation can deepen with every occurrence of a similar moral offense, as opposed to fading away.

We must understand that indignation does extend to the offender and can "deepen" with repetition. This deepening is none other than the "othering" of shock. The presumed point of view of the offender, which includes their beliefs, drives, and decisions, is part and parcel of our interpretation of the offense. So it would be really weird to say that I am shocked by the offense, but not by the offender. I am in disbelief about a person, as much as I am in disbelief about an event. To remember what that feels like, I find it helpful to recall the subject/object correlation of shock and to apply it to a shocking person. On the subjective side, when we are shocked, we experience *alarm*, *incredulity*, as well as a sense of *suddenness*, and a sense of *being derailed* from the normal course of existence. These items have correlates on the objective side, when we take a person as an object of attention. We interpret their actions as 1) intending to attract attention upon themselves, 2) resulting from shallow agency (they must not really believe in their own actions either), 3) born of precipitation, 4) born of carelessness. Finally, if we are talking about an angry kind of shock, we feel *pain*, and so 5) we think they intended to cause pain. It would be a basic phenomenological mistake to think that we project our subjective and wrong feelings onto the objective and true reality. It may very well be the case that we are right to be shocked in this way. Not all political polarization is toxic. Yet, those interpretations can get out of bounds

[32] Ibidem, 1230-1231.

[33] Ibidem, 1225.

and be spun as revealing the *hidden exclusive motives* of our adversaries. Polarization can become toxic when this strangeness we feel towards certain objects turns into a kind of cluelessness. To be clueless, here, means that we are ignorant about a vicious cycle that we create based on our current interpretation of the moral vocation. As we saw, shock is tied to our feeling that we need to respond. Toxicity happens when our response to a shocking event creates a bad habit regarding how we think we ought to respond to that type of event. The habit is bad if it happens to increase the severity of the next shock triggered by an event of the same kind. Recall my example of someone assuming that they have to respond something quick and clever when they are challenged. If this is a habit, *if it is a point of pride*, this will *determine* what will count as shocking next time. The habit will help constitute the next shocking object of attention. And it might not be wise to be shocked by things just because they challenge our speed and cleverness.

Conclusion

Understanding shock is crucial to understanding the phenomenon of "othering", which actively builds up strangeness, exoticism, uncanniness, even horror. "Othering" is the lifeblood of political polarization. It is the affective dimension present in both toxic polarization and normal polarization. In turn, you cannot understand shock, othering, and polarization, if you do not understand surprise and disbelief. A common mistake is to think that surprise can only act as the acknowledgment of the gap between our expectations and reality, and not as a force that can produce such a gap. Similarly, disbelief is often not recognized as the active process of disbelieving what we encounter, and is seen only as pre-existing incredulity or dishonest denial. The benefit of the traumatic experience framework developed by Paula Lorelle is to equip us with notions that make the force of surprise and disbelief more intuitive. The framework hinges on the crucial idea that trauma is not an absence of experience, a mere failure of assimilation of the traumatic event into the realm of experience, but is instead an experience in itself. It is a frustration that has its own power. Once this is admitted, we can see that Stockdale's remarks on moral shock should motivate us to reform our understanding of surprise, and that Osler's remarks on indignation should motivate us

to use that renewed understanding of surprise to understand affective polarization. The deployment of this framework provides the following answers to the questions that arose from the puzzling cases of disbelief. What is the link between the feeling of shock and the feeling of strangeness? Shock can create strangeness. It has the power to renegotiate what ought to count as strange because, fundamentally, our moral sense can exceed our current projects and capabilities, and makes itself heard with very little reference to them. How does this relate to the notion of political polarization? Political polarization is when that strangeness makes us feel that the thoughts of the people we disagree with are uncanny, unreal, and essentially ulterior motives given an intellectual form. You might think that this relationship towards other people is bad. It's not! Not necessarily. It is adversarial, but potentially productive. Toxic political polarization happens when shock and strangeness become pathological, and lead to cluelessness about the politically vicious cycles that we engage in. Bad interpretive habits skew the way we heed the moral call and lead us astray.

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Streszczenie

Szokowanie innych: fenomenologia szoku emocjonalnego i polaryzacji politycznej

Niniejszy artykuł wykorzystuje metodę fenomenologiczną do wyjaśnienia emocji szoku, która stanowi sedno polaryzacji politycznej. Odpowiada na następujące pytanie: czym jest to często paradoksalne uczucie niedowierzania, które odczuwamy, gdy coś nas szokuje, i dlaczego ono sprawia, że ludzie stają się sobie obcy? W przeciwieństwie do innych koncepcji szoku (Stockdale, Osler), staramy się wykorzystać ramy fenomenologiczne „traumatycznego doświadczenia" Lorelle'a, by podkreślić pozytywny aspekt szoku: pokazując, że szok jest doświadczeniem samym w sobie, a nie tylko niepowodzeniem w asymilacji doświadczenia. Wniosek jest taki, że zaskoczenie nie powinno być zawsze postrzegane jako bierne uznanie luki między naszymi oczekiwaniami a rzeczywistością; zamiast tego powinno być w pełni uznane za aktywną siłę. W ten sposób niedowierzanie może być standardem moralnym, który sam się potwierdza i nadaje atmosferę obcości ludziom, z którymi się nie zgadzamy.

Słowa kluczowe: zaskoczenie, szok, niedowierzanie, trauma, inność, obcość, oburzenie, fenomenologia, polaryzacja, Levinas

Zusammenfassung

Andere schockieren: Die Phänomenologie des emotionalen Schocks und der politischen Polarisierung

Im Artikel wird eine phänomenologische Methode angewandt, um die Emotion des Schocks zu erklären, die im Mittelpunkt der politischen Polarisierung steht. Er beantwortet die folgende Frage: Was ist dieses oft paradoxe Gefühl des Unglaubens, das wir empfinden, wenn uns etwas schockiert, und warum macht es die Menschen einander fremd? Im Gegensatz zu anderen Konzepten des Schocks (Stockdale, Osler) versuchen wir, den phänomenologischen Rahmen der „traumatischen Erfahrung" von Lorelle zu nutzen, um den positiven Aspekt des Schocks zu betonen: Wir zeigen, dass der Schock eine Erfahrung an sich ist und nicht nur ein Versagen bei der Verarbeitung von Erfahrungen. Die Schlussfolgerung ist, dass die Überraschung nicht immer als passive Anerkennung der Diskrepanz zwischen unseren Erwartungen und der Realität gesehen werden sollte, sondern dass sie als aktive Kraft anerkannt werden sollte. Auf diese Weise kann der Unglaube eine moralische Norm sein, die sich selbst bestätigt und eine Atmosphäre der Fremdheit für Menschen schafft, mit denen wir nicht einverstanden sind.

Schlüsselwörter: Überraschung, Schock, Unglaube, Trauma, Andersartigkeit, Fremdheit, Empörung, Phänomenologie, Polarisierung, Levinas

Ins Deutsche übersetzt von Anna Pastuszka

Informacja o Autorze:

PIERRICK SIMON, magister filozofii, badacz niezależny; e-mail: lemiroirtranquille@outlook.fr