The Viable Possibility of Humanization

An Encounter with:

Marilyn Nissim-Sabat. *Neither Victim nor Survivor: Thinking toward a New Humanity*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009. 207 pages (including index).

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At the outset of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazilian educator and liberation theorist Paulo Freire identifies “the problem of humanization” and, in particular, the question of “[whether] humanization is a viable possibility” as the singular focus of human existence (43). Although she does not explicitly reference Freire’s work, Marilyn Nissim-Sabat’s new vision of authentic existence explores these same concerns. Like Freire, she is responding to the challenge set by Frantz Fanon: to “work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man” (Fanon 255). And like Fanon, whose challenge she takes very seriously, she works out her philosophical concepts and her vision of human possibilities through her experiences as a practicing psychotherapist.

Nissim-Sabat trenchantly observes of our present situation: “[t]hat man is born free but is everywhere in chains describes the human situation today at least as well as it described Rousseau’s Europe” (100). Her project of thinking a new humanity begins with an account of Karl Marx’s staunch critique of capitalist ideology’s impact on people’s lives and attitudes. Understanding Marx as concerned to “exonerate the victims,” Nissim-Sabat launches her analysis of the possibilities for a post-capitalist humanity with a careful and thoughtful taxonomy

“of ideologically constituted categories of victims extant in the United States ... to show more concretely ... how capitalist ideology acts upon human beings” (3, 4).

The categories into which we typically sort victims, she argues, produce a dichotomy: victims of natural disasters are perceived as faultless, and therefore deserving of assistance, but victims of “social” disasters are too often seen as culpable, and accused of having a “victim mentality” (5-6). This is not reducible to a right-wing versus left-wing clash of perspectives; Nissim-Sabat notes that “liberal ideology holds victims responsible for their plight just as much as does the conservative, primitive, social-Darwinist view [because] ... [l]iberals, too, locate the cause of the victims’ plight in the victims themselves, in their internalized ‘culture of poverty’ for example” (6). This bipartisan “blaming of the victim” supposes that victims have internalized the social causes of their victimization, and glosses internalization as acceptance. In order to avoid the complicity with their circumstances that renders them responsible for their own victim status—indeed, even renders them as clinging to it—they ought, on the bipartisan blaming view, to have chosen to extricate themselves. Well-meaning defenders of people whose suffering is due to social causes (Nissim-Sabat names, in particular, racism, sexism, and classism) have constructed a third category of “victim,” one which is deployed to contest the notion of blameworthy victims, asserting instead that the victim is not complicit and is therefore being blamed unjustly (6). Using the example of women who have been subjected to spousal abuse, Nissim-Sabat offers an example of the standard rationale underpinning this third category: “these people are victims in that they could not reasonably have been expected to act in their own behalf” (7). This, of course, raises the problem of inequality of persons; the only way to be a non-blameworthy victim, it seems, is to be marked by diminished agency.

More importantly, says Nissim-Sabat, the third category—the blameless victims of social ills—carries with it the ever-present danger that it might collapse into the “naive empiricism” she sees as the defining characteristic of the first category: “an attitude that takes experienced events at face value” (7). Because the natural disasters that produce the first category of victims cannot be helped, a collapse of the third category into the first would lead us to believe that nothing can be done about any situation that results in victims. The insight precluded by naive empiricism, which she contends is an offshoot of capitalist ideology, is that “much human suffering could be avoided if we lived in a society that put people before profits” (11, 8). What we need, in order to talk about victimization in a way that is neither condemnatory nor fatalist, is a new category, one constructed outside of the confines of capitalist ideology (12). In her words, what we need is to understand that:

a victim is one who has been victimized by an other ...[and] victims of oppression, under extreme duress, often identify with their oppressor and become accomplices in their own oppression. To say this is not to blame the victim; rather, it is the only way to preclude blaming the victim. Victim blaming is the claim that victims will their own oppression [but] ... when under extreme duress people identify with their aggressors, they are not choosing to be oppressed; they are indeed choosing, but what they are choosing is, rather, the only means of coping ... they believe to be available to them. (157)

Continuing with the example of women who are abused by their spouses, Nissim-Sabat concedes that “[t]he abused woman potentially could have detected the abuse at an early stage,” and could therefore have avoided most of the damage she would end up suffering; however, the fact that she did not see the early warning signs of an abusive relationship does not constitute her consent or her culpability—indeed, it speaks to a “developmental arrest” that Nissim-Sabat thinks is pervasive in capitalist societies (12). This is importantly different from the “diminished capacity” attribution implicitly made by well-meaning progressives who argue that the woman is incapable of ever acting on her own behalf. Nissim-Sabat thinks she has the capacity but has not

developed it. Furthermore, it is not the case that only some people are incapable—abused women, poor people; instead Nissim-Sabat identifies developmental arrest as “the psychosocial state of the majority of people reared in capitalist societies” (13). The Marxist goal of exonerating the victims that this book advances cannot be achieved unless we acknowledge “norms of psychic health and maturity” toward which flourishing human beings strive, norms that are impeded within societies like the U.S., which Nissim-Sabat likens to a Hobbesian “war of every one against every one” (14). Once we accept, however, that such norms do transcend our cultural concepts, we have a standard by which to evaluate these cultures, we can start to see that many of the deficiencies for which victims are blamed are far more widespread, and we can call for sustained transformation of societies rather than blaming of victims.

The following chapters draw on this careful conceptual work, and develop Nissim-Sabat’s thinking about victimhood, victim blaming, and the impoverishment of a human life dedicated to survival as its primary value. Expertly and confidently, she weaves together a view of the self-actualized human being that draws on Husserlian phenomenology, feminist critiques of Freudian psychoanalysis and philosophy of science, a Socratic analysis of the incoherence of the concept of *akrasia*, the “revolutionary” existential humanism articulated by Fanon, and the kind of deeply perceptive literary analysis that shows us the enduring capacity that great works of literature have to reveal us to ourselves. Each chapter builds on Nissim-Sabat’s passionate commitment to a sharable set of values that transcend cultural idiosyncrasies, and builds towards a view of human beings as richly and complexly embedded in a social world. Thus, in the process of articulating a view of human existence that is, as she puts it, “*before* victimization and *beyond* survival,” Nissim-Sabat also takes on the universalist versus cultural relativist debate and

the individual versus society conflict that are implicated in so much of the social philosophy that concerns us as existentialists and phenomenologists (166).

These contributions to continental philosophy are mined from her meticulous evaluations of the literature and controversies of psychoanalysis, which show her to be widely-read across disciplines that are too often not synthesized. In her careful unpacking of the Freudian story about moral development, for instance—which she conducts through a critical review of literature in feminist theology—she reveals the undisclosed inconsistency of classical Freudian psychoanalysis: it depends not on the repression of desire that results in formation of the superego but on the father’s assertion of himself as the family’s authority figure through repression of the mother (32). Turning to Husserlian phenomenology to provide a philosophical ground for psychoanalysis, Nissim-Sabat argues that “an empiricist epistemology ... must be encompassed by the more radical empiricism of transcendental phenomenology” (33). This theme is continued across discussions in different chapters of the crisis caused by questions about the theoretical foundations of psychoanalysis—whether it is a natural science or a hermeneutic discipline—and the extent to which reliance on “the medical model” in psychiatry is a crucial explanatory factor in the racism and victim blaming that permeate diagnoses and treatment practices (44; 111-116). Transcendental phenomenology is particularly well-suited to provide the philosophical foundation needed by psychiatry, Nissim-Sabat tells us, because of its methodological suspension of ontological commitments, its radical self-investigation, its affirmation of the uniqueness of each individual, and the belief it offers us in our freedom to remake ourselves and our world (124).

Returning to the first chapter’s exposé of victim-blaming and drawing extensively on her interest in Socratic virtue ethics, Nissim-Sabat reflects upon her experience in addiction

counselling in order to offer us a unique perspective on the philosophical disreputability of *akrasia*. She notes: “[a]ddicted persons strike observers as paradigmatic cases, not at all of rationality, but precisely of that form of irrationality referred to ... as ... weakness of will, or *akrasia*,” and further notes that this attitude is held even by addicted people themselves—an instance of self-blaming (81). Indeed, her observation that the standard view conflates an alleged weakness of will with irrationality is right on target. Quite recently, for example, Rev. Ric Matthews of the First United Church in Vancouver, British Columbia, was interviewed about social tensions between the 2010 Winter Olympics Organizing Committee and the impoverished homeless population of Vancouver’s Downtown East Side. While we might expect someone who ministers to a desperately poor and troubled community to show some compassion for, and solidarity with, them, Matthews instead characterized the mentally ill and severely addicted members of this community as “essentially irrational” (interview, 9 January 2010). Denouncing this attitude as a form of blaming the victim and insisting that such attributions of weakness of will ought not to be made, Nissim-Sabat offers a surprising and interestingly contrarian perspective on substance abuse. Contrary to the standard view, she contends that “all things considered, given their internal and external constraints, given the options available to them, when using mood altering substances addicted persons do act in their true or actual best interest” (81). As was the case in her earlier discussion of women who may have failed to see warning signs of future abuse early in their relationships, Nissim-Sabat is clear in her view that substance addiction must not be reified into a personal defect. It is an inadequate coping mechanism deployed by some people in a society that teaches us very little about either adequate coping

mechanisms or effective social transformation. As I understand her, what she wants to draw our attention to, in the case of substance abuse, is that, inadequate or not, it is *an attempt to cope*.

This principled recognition of the value of one's efforts to live the best life one possibly can arises out of Nissim-Sabat's remarkable and unshakeable humanism, reminiscent of the values championed by the thinkers she credits as her inspirations: revolutionary existential humanist Frantz Fanon; Marxist humanist Raya Dunayevskaya; and phenomenological sociologist and philosopher Lewis R. Gordon (15-17). She is a thinker and healer who does not accept that damaged people exist in a stasis out of which they can never move, who refuses to write off and throw away victims. Perhaps this is why Nissim-Sabat sees so clearly and expresses so forcefully another devastating facet of capitalist ideology: its systemic tendency to disrupt development of our capacity for empathy. "The capacity to experience empathy," she contends, "requires a capacity to experience feelings of dependency and extreme vulnerability in oneself and others, and it is precisely this that capitalist ideology prohibits. Thus, capitalist ideology dehumanizes us by cutting us off from the springs of our humanity" (13).

Empathy as "the springs of our humanity" is explored in depth in the book's final two chapters, both of which contain sustained philosophical analyses of literary works. This philosophizing through literature is a particular strength of Nissim-Sabat's interdisciplinary tour-de-force. We are treated, first, to an in-depth exploration of the necessary relation Nissim-Sabat thinks obtains between autonomy and empathy through her close reading of *Antigone* and her carefully constructed critique of the secondary literature. Defining empathy as "the capacity to apprehend the motivational structure of the psychic life and worldview of the other person as other," Nissim-Sabat takes up the character of Antigone as an instantiation of the truly moral autonomy that is possible only because of its inextricable link with empathy (133-134). Because

of a conventional acceptance of the opposition of individual versus society—an opposition that Nissim-Sabat staunchly rejects—our society manifests “the tendency to view autonomy, self-rule, in a morally negative light, [which] ... results from failure to conceive it in its necessary relation to empathy” (134). Here, too, Husserlian phenomenology is useful in constructing a view of personhood that does not put us always in a context of perennial conflict; what it offers us is “precisely a phenomenological account of the mediation of individual and community” (158).

The book’s final chapter continues to articulate the importance of empathy as it moves us, through an examination of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, more explicitly towards Nissim-Sabat’s positive view of humanity beyond the victim-survivor dichotomy. Having already told us, in her discussion of *Antigone*, that “the choice of mere physical survival ... violates the possibility of ethics,” Nissim-Sabat goes on to link the injustice of victim blaming with the inadequacy of “survival” as an aim of a properly human existence (157). She rejects “the notion that ‘survival’ is a meaningful, positive, or desirable outcome of or response to trauma or victimization,” explaining that survival cannot itself be a value; instead, it is the ground, or precondition, of values (165). We do a disservice to human possibilities if we accept that mere survival is the best that we can strive for (165). “[T]he segue from victim into survivor, taken as a denial of victimization and as best outcome ... is,” she notes, “a function of forces of oppression and ... it must be exposed as such” (166). The need to reject both victim blaming and bare survival are messages that Nissim-Sabat draws out of Morrison’s novel. The great value of *Beloved*, she observes, is that it “enables us to consider the consequences for the victims ... [and thereby]

enhances both our ability to empathize with the victims as individuals and ... our motivation to seek redress for all victims of dehumanization” (180).

Echoing the sermons of Martin Luther King Jr., with whom she marched in the 1960s, Nissim-Sabat concludes: “it is indeed to be hoped that the human capacity for love, in all its forms, including of course active resistance to real inhumanity, will motivate us toward a better future” (158).

Works Cited

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