

Shay Welch

Existential Eroticism: A Feminist Approach to Understanding Women's Oppression-Perpetuating Choices

Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2015 (ISBN 978-1-4985-0541-3)

Diana Tietjens Meyers (University of Connecticut, Storrs)

..

Diana Tietjens Meyers is Professor Emerita of Philosophy at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. She has held the Ignacio Ellacuría Chair of Social Ethics at Loyola University, Chicago and the Laurie Chair in Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers University. She works in three main areas of philosophy: philosophy of action, feminist ethics and aesthetics, and human rights. Her monographs are *Inalienable Rights: A Defense* (Columbia University Press, 1985), *Self, Society, and Personal Choice* (Columbia University Press, 1989), *Subjection and Subjectivity: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Moral Philosophy* (Routledge, 1994), and *Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women's Agency* (Oxford University Press, 2002, also available through *Oxford Scholarship Online*). *Being Yourself: Essays on Identity, Action, and Social Life* is a collection of her essays (Rowman and Littlefield, 2004). She has edited seven collections and two special journal issues and published many journal articles and chapters in books. Her most recent edited collection is *Poverty, Agency, and Human Rights* (Oxford University Press, 2014). Her new monograph, *Victims' Stories and the Advancement of Human Rights* (Oxford University Press), will come out March 15, 2016.

Shay Welch's *Existential Eroticism* belongs in the same tradition as Susan Brison's *Aftermath* -- the deeply personal philosophical book. Like Brison, Welch writes from her own experience and that of her female relations: "I cannot recall a woman in my family aside from myself who has not been trapped within at least one violent relationship" (17). She goes on to lovingly describe her Aunt Nancy, who worked as a stripper and was murdered by a violent male partner, and her oldest sister, whose seemingly sweet prom date turned into a vicious abuser once they had married (17–18). While she put herself through school, Welch herself was employed in the sex industry as a "vixen" -- a bar or restaurant employee who flaunts her sexuality and flirts with customers to extract high tips (5). Domestic violence and sex work set the agenda for *Existential Eroticism*.

Also like Brison, Welch writes from a conviction that philosophers have not adequately theorized the topics she takes up. However, Welch specifically targets white, middle-class, heterosexual feminist philosophers for criticism (2–4, 81, 95, 137, 178–79). As I have no personal experience with violent domestic abuse or sex work, Welch would classify me as a feminist who can write only from the "privilege of safety." Bearing her misgivings in mind, I'll try to do justice to her work. Still, I note that Welch does not altogether repudiate feminist philosophy. Although she is fiercely critical of white, middle-class, heterosexual feminist philosophers who condescend to or condemn women who stay in abusive relationships or who do sex work and disavow feminism, she addresses many of us as interlocutors and finds inspiration in the work of some.

Her overarching argument proceeds by taking up the following sequence of issues: (1) an exposition of what she means by existential eroticism and how it affects women's autonomy; (2) an account of why existential eroticism is a pervasive form of coercion that affects women as a group; (3) an analysis of individually targeted duress, necessity, and coercion within the larger coercive context of existential eroticism; (4) a defense of what she calls *desperate rationality* -- that is, strategic agency despite ongoing coercively induced trauma; (5) a critique of blaming women who cling to adaptive preferences for perpetuating oppression; and (6) an examination of productive practices of blame and forgiveness among women. I'll take up these issues in turn as I outline *Existential Eroticism*.

Welch invokes Catharine MacKinnon's theory of gender to underwrite her account of existential eroticism and to explain why no woman is immune to it (36–43). According to Welch, women exist as sex objects for men, and women are motivated to conform to norms of feminine allure because they get narcissistic satisfaction by cultivating their heterosexual desirability. Moreover, in the patriarchal world in which sex, women's submission, and eroticized violence are inextricably bound up, women also grasp at a measure of safety by forming ties to powerful men. Welch doesn't take up feminist objections to MacKinnon's view that accuse her theory of depriving women of agency. But she asks whether women's choices within the regime of existential eroticism are autonomous (43–52). Although she urges that women's desire to fit into their social milieu and the associated denial mechanisms that ease the compromises necessary to achieve this goal clearly interfere with autonomy, in the end Welch draws no definitive conclusions about the prospects for women's autonomy under existential eroticism (51–52).

In the three chapters that follow, Welch takes up various ways in which the power relations defined by existential eroticism exert control over women's lives. She begins chapter 3 by distinguishing among duress, necessity, and coercion. Although the distinctions she draws strike me as somewhat stipulative, I set my reservations aside in the interest of focusing on the theoretical insight Welch wrests from her understandings of these concepts.

In her view, existential eroticism is first and foremost a systemic and inescapable form of coercion (62–69). Consequently, women have no choice but to comply with its dictates. Yet Welch goes on in chapters 4 and 5 to explore one-on-one forms of duress, necessity, and coercion within the broadly coercive context of existential eroticism, and here she underscores how intersectional considerations of gender, race, and class positioning come into play at different levels of threat. All three of these concepts reference cases in which one person imposes on another a demand that she choose between two evils. What demarcates them from one another are the escalating degrees of harm attendant on the choices men foist on their female victims—with duress imposing the least harmful alternatives and coercion imposing the most harmful ones (74–96). Victims of coercion suffer from trauma-based desperation as a result of being subjected to long-term violent

abuse, and victims' trauma-based desperation poses an insuperable obstacle to their autonomy (101, 106–10).

Nevertheless, trauma-based desperation does not preclude victims' agentic engagement with abusers. Chapter 6 is devoted to defending this pivotal claim. Although Welch joins Claudia Card in acknowledging that luck plays a role in contending with vicious, persistent gendered violence, Welch maintains that the trauma-based desperation caused by this abuse induces a "heightened rationality" in some victims (129). Earlier in *Existential Eroticism*, Welch distinguishes survivors from fighters. Survivors keep going mostly thanks to luck, whereas fighters resist mostly thanks to strategic rationality (16–17). Chapter 6 is about victims who are also fighters and how they fight. Fighters are guided by what Welch calls "desperate rationality." Her innovative account of this agentic logic provides the foundation for her subsequent treatment of the moral responsibility of the most vulnerable victims of existential eroticism.

Welch's key claim in chapter 6 is that understanding the standpoint of victims of prolonged, severe domestic violence entails recognizing that the circumstances in which these women are trapped pry autonomy and rationality apart. Summing up her position, she contends that in these cases there is an "inverse relationship between autonomy and rationality" (142). Her task, then, is to lay out a form of rationality that doesn't count as contributing to autonomy but that does enable victims of prolonged, severe domestic violence to resist abuse. After arguing that rational choice theory does not provide tools adequate to the task of explicating the "desperate rationality" of fighters (132–43), Welch turns to game theory (143–52). Because one branch of game theory focuses on noncooperative, infinitely repeated interactions between agents with asymmetrical and incomplete information, Welch regards it as a promising theory of the rationality of women who fight long-term, brutal domestic violence.

Fighters and abusers share knowledge of the workings of existential eroticism, but fighters understand these forces from a subordinate perspective to which abusers don't have access (147). Fighters living with trauma-based desperation operate with an "epistemology of danger" that enables them to anticipate their abusers' behavior and thus to maneuver to protect themselves despite the violence besieging them (147). However, abusers rely on inaccurate stereotypes of their victims and therefore can't anticipate the strategic moves they make (147). Fighters take advantage of this asymmetry. By pretending to be compliant and helpless, fighters encourage abusers to believe that they are succeeding in dominating them and that they have reason to trust their victims to remain submissive (148). Once convinced that he has decisively conquered his victim and deluded that he can trust her, an abuser regards his violent scenario as an infinitely repeatable game. But he's mistaken because the fighter he believes he has vanquished is looking for an opportunity to terminate the game by escaping (148).

Although the fighter chooses the clearly suboptimal option of staying with her abuser, Welch maintains that she is not irrational. Rather, she is biding her time and using her knowledge of her abuser's routine moves to reduce the harm she suffers at his hands, until ultimately she seizes her chance to leave him. If so, the fighter's feigned compliance is a

rational means to the rational end of escape (150). According to Welch, however, fighters often escape from one site of abuse to another—for example, trading the relentless peril of domestic battery for acting in pornography in order to gain surcease and financial independence (151).

What is a white, middle-class, heterosexual feminist to think? Welch urges that, whatever our views about sex work may be, we should not hold fighters caught up in abusive relationships responsible for their part in perpetuating gendered oppression, for "desperation breaks the link between rationality and moral responsibility" (151). Chapter 7 expands on and defends this claim. Referring back to the distinctions she draws in chapter 3, Welch argues that gendered duress excuses and thus decreases the moral responsibility of women who don't resist it and that gendered necessity justifies women's actions and further reduces their moral responsibility when they fail to resist it (154, 167–71). But women who have succumbed to traumatic desperation bear no moral responsibility whatsoever for their compliant conduct, for the scope of their agency is confined to managing their abusers and deflecting renewed violence (171–72).

Up to this point, Welch is assessing the legitimacy of holding victims responsible for actions they have performed in the past. She now switches to the issue of forward-looking responsibility for oppression-perpetuating conduct (174–84). In this regard, she proposes desperate rationality as a "paradigm case" of taking responsibility to seek liberation (175). Broadly, she holds that all women, the differences in their social positioning notwithstanding, bear a measure of responsibility for devising strategies that are compatible with their own safety but that somehow defy the constraints of existential eroticism, thereby minimizing their contributions to the persistence of this form of oppression (183).

The final chapter of *Existential Eroticism* takes up a theme that recurs throughout the book -- namely, the vexed relations between white, middle-class, heterosexual feminists and women of color, poor women, and lesbians. Here, Welch endorses an interpretation of blame as signaling a troubled relationship (198–201). Understanding blame in this way avoids the harshness of condemning individual women who are relegated to the most damaging sites of the existential eroticism regime and instead spotlights the need to adjust or repair impaired relationships. After noting the resentment that festers among hierarchically situated women, Welch turns to the question of how women can forgive one another. She rejects accounts of forgiveness that polarize perpetrators and victims (209) and advocates a view of forgiveness anchored in empathy and building trust (210–11). Moreover, she urges that such mutual forgiveness is possible (212–15). And thus, she ends her book on a hopeful note for a liberatory future.

Throughout *Existential Eroticism*, Welch draws subtle distinctions and makes forceful arguments concerning staggeringly difficult issues. No doubt the tremendous ambition of Welch's project coupled with the extreme complexity of existential eroticism's disparate impacts on diverse women contribute to the difficulty of following the twists and turns of her thinking. Still, Welch's book is a heartfelt tribute to her Aunt Nancy, her older sister, and the vixen sex workers she once worked alongside. As well, it is a resolute

philosophical inquiry into the suffering she herself, her family members, and her friends endured (and that so many women like them continue to endure), and it is a sustained reclamation of their dignity as agents.