

Susan Brison

Aftermath: Violence and the remaking of a self

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“Aftermath” is a forceful book, vivid in its language, gripping in its candor, elegant in its effortless weaving together of traditional philosophy, psychology, and personal narrative.

As I began reading Susan Brison’s book *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, I was in the middle of the first trimester of my second pregnancy. Like many women, I was not “going public” with the pregnancy until the first trimester had been successfully completed, so I found myself battling fatigue and the cruelly misnamed morning sickness without the knowledge of my family, friends, and colleagues. At one point, I remarked to my husband that because no one knew I was pregnant, I myself often forgot that I was, and simply felt myself to be sick and exhausted.

Pregnancy, in my case, did not constitute trauma, the topic of Susan Brison’s latest book. Nevertheless, I think Brison would understand my experience. One of the major arguments in this most lucid, compelling, and—the word runs the risk of being patronizing, but it is unavoidable—brave book is that to speak of a traumatic experience is to change the meaning of the experience itself. To suffer a traumatic event, or a series of traumatic events, may be among the most terrifyingly lonely of human experiences; to emerge from that experience, in fits and starts, forever marked by it, necessitates the empathic participation of others.

It is crucial to this particular analysis that the author knows whereof she speaks. Those familiar with Brison’s work will remember that she was the victim of a brutal rape and attempted murder, and she calls upon this horrific experience to provide a phenomenological account of the experience of trauma itself and its extended repercussions. Brison describes her own philosophical reluctance or hesitation to marry personal experience with philosophical analysis; she seems keenly aware that many philosophers will dismiss the former as overly particular, emotional, and far too tenuous upon which to build the latter. And indeed one can hear the implied voices of such critics in the second chapter, an extended defense of “the personal as the political,” which, though admirable in its sensitivity to the limitations of experience both epistemologically and politically, does smack of a little too much protest. Readers of *Hypatia*, at least, will need no such defense of Brison’s methodology, and, I predict, will respond to her working through of her own experience with only philosophical gratitude.

The philosophical issues that arise from Brison’s experience are plentiful, ranging from the epistemological to the metaphysical, from the aesthetic to the political (4), and she does a superb job in both delineating and exploring them. However, her focus remains clearly on the notion of the self. She argues that traumatic events undermine essential beliefs without which a subject cannot function: “When the trauma is of human origin and is intentionally inflicted, the kind I discuss in this book, it not only shatters one’s fundamental assumptions about the world and

one's safety in it, but it also severs the sustaining connection between the self and the rest of humanity" (40). "Beliefs" is not quite the right word here; what Brison is speaking to is similar to Kant's regulative ideals, the ideas that, while themselves cannot be proven rationally, must nevertheless be functioning in order for the human subject to perceive and experience. Just as Kant says we must act "as if" God exists, or "as if" the human soul is immortal, so Brison is claiming that any subjective action—walking down a street, picking up the phone, never mind building a career or a family—rests on the assumption that the world and its inhabitants do not pose a lethal threat. When that assumption is clearly, undeniably dismantled, the subject finds itself paralyzed, unable to go on. This is the "temporary social death" (46) of which Brison speaks, and it persists far beyond the experience of the trauma itself. Brison uses this phenomenology of trauma to argue convincingly that three seemingly different theories of the self—the embodied, the narrative, and the (relationally) autonomous—are in fact compatible, and represent different facets of the self that are all present in the victim of trauma. Here Brison has perhaps slightly overstated the seeming incommensurability of these different theories; nevertheless, they prove to be a fertile basis from which to understand the complexity of the experience of trauma.

If an experience of trauma undermines the very possibility of subjectivity, if it explodes the self and memory into an incoherent set of fragments, brittle in their fragile sharpness, then certainly a good deal of despair is warranted. Brison doesn't deny the point, nor does she underplay it. But the hope that marks her analysis is as philosophically sound as it is emotionally welcome. For if one takes the self as vulnerable to the violent actions of others (or, we may remember in the wake of the tsunami disaster in the Indian Ocean, of non-human forces), then one must also recognize the at least theoretical possibility that the self is also open to the healing forces of others. "[T]he self is both autonomous and socially dependent, vulnerable enough to be undone by violence and yet resilient enough to be reconstructed with the help of empathic others" (38). Of course, such reconstruction is neither guaranteed, nor, perhaps, in some social and political climates, likely. But it is possible, and it is on this possibility that Brison hangs her hat.

As mentioned above, one crucial way in which victims of traumatic events reconstruct their (new) selves is by telling their stories. Brison eschews any easy analysis of why such tellings are helpful; she does not pretend, for example, that all tellings are similar, or that the victims simply need to "unburden" herself once or twice to be purged of the experience. Rather, she approaches such narratives as deeply intersubjective events, ones whose outcomes depend as much upon the listener as the teller: "[A narrative] is a social interaction—actual or imagined or anticipated or remembered—in which what gets told is shaped by the (perceived) interests of the listeners, by what the listeners want to know and also by what they cannot or will not hear" (102). Brison is also acutely aware of the dangers of sharing such stories, of the chances that they will be used against the victims themselves, to demonstrate their weaknesses. Ultimately, though, she asserts that the benefits of such stories, both to the individual victims and their communities, far outweigh such risks. Narrative is a powerful tool, Brison argues, well matched to the particularities of the harms that trauma visits upon persons. It is an attempt to create coherence out of chaos, to wrench the subjective power away from the assailant and return it to the victim, and to reach out beyond the existential isolation of victimization to others. Although Brison doesn't use quite these terms, I imagined telling one's story as a way of giving it a place within the self, and having that place be recognized by others. Before an experience is located within a

narrative, it is diffuse, and threatens to both fracture and saturate the self. Giving it a place is a way of integrating it within the self, while also attempting to give it a size: a large size, perhaps, but a bounded size nonetheless, which is a way of recognizing that there is room for other experiences in this self as well. For Brison, one crucial experience that occurred four years after her assault was the birth of her son. This happy event is not untouched by her experience of assault—she anticipates with some dread the day when she will have to tell him this story—but there is room for it in her integrated self. Over and over again, Brison emphasizes that the point of reconstructing the self is not to put the experience “behind” her, not to “forget it” (as some well-meaning people suggested), but to bring it into her self in such a way so that she can once again function as a subject.

“Aftermath” is a forceful book, vivid in its language, gripping in its candor, elegant in its effortless weaving together of traditional philosophy, psychology, and personal narrative. I can find few faults in it. There were some minor points that gave me pause; for example, Brison refers several times to the “objectification” of trauma victims, and in so doing seems to conflate two meanings of “object:” on the one hand, the victim is the helpless, passive object of the assailant’s subjective actions, and on the other hand, the victim is reduced to mere materiality, mere flesh, an inanimate object. This is, of course, a common conflation, and to claim that torturers and rapists objectify their victims is also a common claim. Yet this analysis seems to me to miss at least one crucial aspect of the phenomenon of human-inflicted trauma, and that is the absolute necessity, from the assailant’s perspective, that his or her victim is in fact a person. It is not the case that the rapist or the torturer denies the subjective suffering of the victim (a suffering that an inanimate object could not experience). In fact, that suffering is the whole point. What is interesting to me here is that even in a case of extreme violence and disproportionate power, where one person is rendered virtually completely helpless, unable to affect what is happening, even here, intersubjectivity plays a role. The assailant needs the victim, and he or she needs that victim to be a feeling person, capable of great suffering. The notion of objectification misses some of these nuances.

Also—and perhaps this is a matter for another work—given the crucial role of the listener to the healing of the trauma victim, I would have liked a similarly detailed philosophical account of what it means to “bear witness.” Brison emphasizes the need for empathy, without delving into the conditions of possibility for such empathy. I would hazard a guess that one of the crucial aspects of being a healing listener is the capacity for wonder: the courageous assumption that, as a listener, one does not know much about the experience that is being described. In any case, a more detailed phenomenology of listening would have been valuable.

These are minor points. “Aftermath” is a welcome addition to the feminist literature on rape specifically and trauma in general, and Susan Brison is to be commended for an insightful, accessible, and bold analysis.

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