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BOOK REVIEW

Timeless Grandiosity and Eroticized Contempt: Technical Challenges Posed by Cases of Narcissism and Perversion, by Michael Shoshani and Batya Shoshani, Oxfordshire: Phoenix Publishing House, 2021, 338 pp., £27.89 (ISBN 9781912691616)

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It is difficult to know what to do with "perversion" today. As the Italian psychoanalyst Sergio Benvenuto writes at the beginning of his recent book on the subject, "Today, the mere use of the word perversion is perceived with growing suspicion and concern. It is not politically correct, especially in the United States" (2016, p. xiii). Indeed, as Benvenuto goes on to explain, there is a growing consensus among contemporary Anglophone clinicians that perversion is a problematic diagnostic concept insofar as it can be shown to merely reflect the moral judgments of a given time and place. Far from representing an objective pathology, perversion has become exemplary of psychology's "constructed" dimension, which is to say, that far from connoting a clear or definitive mental disturbance, perversion may be nothing more than a moralizing instrument of state power, one that camouflages prejudice in the language of pseudopsychology. As Dany Nobus has argued, the "definition of perversion as an aberration of the sexual instinct, in which the reproductive purpose of the human sexual function is literally perverted" poses considerable problems for any objective assessment of perversion because it defines, a priori, sexuality as necessarily oriented toward reproduction, thereby relegating everything that *deviates* from that standard as automatically perverse (2006, p. 6). This emphasis on sexual deviation is not only endemic to the word perversion itself—etymologically, "to pervert" (from the Latin *pervertere*) meant "to turn around," "to turn upside down"—but emblematic of the ways that the diagnosis of perversion is used to sustain a narrow view of human sexuality. For this reason, Nobus writes that,

> what we are encountering here is the intervention of a socio-cultural standard of ethico-legal acceptability, which has (often implicitly) confounded all of the purportedly value-free taxonomies of sexual perversion, whether sexological, psychiatric, or psychoanalytic. No matter how hard scholars have tried to avoid discussing perversion with reference to moral principles, they have generally failed to live up to the expectations of an "objective" and "neutral" science. (2006, p. 8).

The critique of perversion originally emerged in academic circles by historians of sexuality who drew on Foucault to problematize the implicit normativity of psychological "science." At the time, homosexuality was still included in the *DSM* (it was removed in 1973) and much of orthodox psychoanalysis uncritically perpetuated moralistic views about what constituted normal versus abnormal sexuality (Giffney & Watson, 2017). For much of the field, perversion became exemplary of how prejudice could masquerade as psychoanalytic theory, and efforts were made to depathologize perversion, such that by 1980, the *DSM-III* decided to substitute "paraphilia" for "perversion" because "the latter was believed to have too many pejorative moral connotations (American Psychiatric Association, 1980)" (Nobus, 2019, p. 10). Fast forward to the present, and it should come as no surprise that,

> in today's climate, simply dedicating an entire book to perversion rather than to paraphilias might be seen as a conservative provocation … The task facing the intellectual of the twenty-first century is not to explain, understand, or analyze perversion, but to show how the category of "pervert" was historically formed—in order to abandon it today. (Benvenuto, 2016, p. xiv)

Under these discursive conditions, it is a mark of Michael and Batya Shoshani's intellectual bravery that they have chosen to write a book about perversion, and to do so not by denying its controversiality but by insisting on the clinical relevance of this complicated term. As they explain in the introduction to their recent book, *Timeless Grandiosity and Eroticised Comtempt: Technical Challenges Posed by Cases of Narcissism and Perversion* (2021), "while analytic thinkers continue debating the use of the term 'perversion,' suffering patients cross our doorstep everyday and we are often helplessly struggling to address their predicament" (2021, p. xxiii). As two established psychoanalysts practicing in Israel, the authors bring a wealth of experience and case material to their discussion of perversion, making every effort to demonstrate that beneath the high-minded debates about moralistic theory are suffering patients who need the nosological specificity that the concept of perversion provides. Intent on "formulat[ing] a clinical concept of perversion" (Shoshani & Shoshani, 2021, p. xxiv), the authors define the term "as an intensification of destructive narcissism, where the death instinct predominates over the life instinct. This reveals itself in pathological internal and external object-relations, colored by massive sexualization, aggressivisation, and deception" (Shoshani & Shoshani, 2021, p. xxiv). Importantly, the authors argue that while "sexual aberration" is "significant, we do not see it as the core of this clinical entity" (Shoshani & Shoshani, 2021, p. xxiv). For them, it is narcissistic destructiveness that distinguishes perversion from other pathologies, and, drawing on Andre Green, they define this kind of narcissism as the denial of the gap between self and other. In their view,

> the perverse psychic organization of a patient spring from their inability to cope with the pathological envy resulting from their exclusion from parental intimacy. Nor is the child able to cope with their profound frustration over their own smallness vis-à-vis the parents' bigness, which also means that they cannot be an adequate partner for the mother. (Shoshani & Shoshani, 2021, p. xxvii)

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The authors situate their own views on the etiology of perversion in the context of broader debates about whether pathology is caused by structural flaws or trauma/defense, arguing that both of these theoretical approaches have merit. To paint a portrait of how this perverse psychic organization manifests in treatment, the authors describe the perverse patient as "wag[ing] war against "the order inherent in the oedipal universe" in an attempt to "degrade and break off the combined mother–father object and to undermine the basic differences between sexes and generations, *thus falsifying reality and destroying truth in favor of absolute interchangeability*" (Shoshani & Shoshani, 2021, p. xxviii). According to them,

> those aspects of reality that a perverse patient has difficulty accepting are described by Steiner (after Money-Kyrle) as "the three basic facts of life" (2018). They are: (a) "the reality of the dependence on an external good object," (b) "the reality of the parents' sexual relationship," and (c) "the recognition of the inevitability of time and ultimately death" (Steiner, 2018, 1279). (Shoshani & Shoshani, 2021, p. xxviii)

Moreover, it is differences *as such* which are systematically eliminated "to prevent mental suffering at all levels: Gone are sensations of inadequacy, castration, loss, and death, as are separateness and abandonment" (xxxi). To ground these descriptions in a clinical context, the authors provide rich and nuanced case studies that describe the challenges that arise in working with these patients. They also discuss the concept of the lifegiver object (chapter 1), a typology of three forms of envy (chapter 3), the failure to think, mourn, and love (chapter 4), the frame (chapter 5), the therapist–patient–supervisee relationship (chapter 6), sadomasochistic organization (chapter 7), the film *Incendies* (chapter 8), Louis Borges (chapter 9), and Heidegger (chapter 10).

As the breadth of these topics suggests, the authors cover extensive ground, drawing on a wide variety of sources to illuminate the internal world and clinical experience of perverse patients. Although they do not single out the work of Sheldon Bach on the topic, their approach seems reminiscent of Bach's seminal argument about perversion as a disorder of identity (and not just sexuality), and of the key feature of perversion as a lack of capacity for whole-object love (Bach, 1994). As Bach explains, "what is pathological in perverse relationships is the undifferentiated and unstable object world existing in a psychic space unable to contain separate autonomous objects" (1994, p. 70). When placed in dialog with Bach's observations, we become able to see how the Shoshani's definition of perversion as the denial of self-other differentiation is not only an extension of Bach's ideas, but an attempt to explain *how* and even *why* a particular patient fails to develop adequate capacities for healthy object love.

Given the fieldwide resistance to discussing perversion in moralistic and stigmatizing terms, it is understandable that the authors would (much like Bach) choose to focus on the narcissistic components of the pathology rather than any putative relation to sexuality. That is, by treating perversion as a disorder of narcissism rather than a sexual problem, the authors sidestep the controversies the term provokes but I would like to suggest that in so doing, they potentially forfeit the opportunity for a richer engagement with the topic, one that endeavors to explore perversion as a pathology with specifically *sexual* dimensions. In his work on the subject, Benvenuto suggests that

> we ought to consider perverse any act which brings the subject sexual enjoyment while the other subject is involved only as an *instrument* to that enjoyment, and when the first subject does not consider the enjoyment, especially sexual, of this other subject as an end to his act. (2016, p. 2)

By this criteria, "even a very trivial act—like having sex with a prostitute—can be considered perverse: one does not frequent prostitutes to give them sexual pleasure" (2016, p. 2). Unique to this view is the idea that it is not really using the other as an *object* which makes an act perverse but rather, using the other as a *subject* whose subjectivity is then destroyed. In other words, perversion is not simply a failure to see the other *as an other*, but a choice to use their *subjectivity* as a basis for one's own enjoyment only. "It is not," Benvenuto writes, "the desired anatomical object that makes the perversion, but what I would call the lack of *care for the other as the subject of desire and enjoyment*" (2016, p. 10). In this framing, not only is sexual enjoyment central to the definition of perversion—rather than incidental to it—but so too is ethics, with Benvenuto refusing to shy away from the imbrication of ethics and psychology.

While the Shoshani's also devote the final chapter of their book to broader questions of ethics and (Heideggerian) Truth, what I think we can learn from Benvenuto's contemporaneous meditation on perversion, is that, despite an intellectual climate which is often hostile to the term, there is clinical value in specifying the relationship between perversion, sexuality, and ethics. To wit, we might even wonder whether the pervert's use of the other's subjectivity for their own enjoyment is not *only* a result of the failed Oedipal complex (as most theorists from Freud onward suggest), but has instead something to do with the early mother–infant bond in which the infant is helplessly exposed to the mother's overwhelming subjectivity. Could it be that perversion is but one possible strategy for managing the anxiety that the m*other's* "otherness" provokes? After all, there is no infant that can pass through the earliest developmental stages without total dependence on the mother for care. And as we also know, there is no mother who can take care of her infant without also transmitting her own sexual messages (Laplanche, 2011). Putting these two things together allows us to consider that perversion may indeed be an attempt to manage, and eventually defeat, the otherness which comes at me from the mother, a strategy for taking pleasure in the reversal of that painful dynamic. If so, then perversion is not retrograde but as timely as ever because so long as there are infants who need caretaking and mothers who take care of them, there will be sexuality, and with it, perversion.

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