

Diana Tietjens Meyers

Victims' Stories and the Advancement of Human Rights

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Reviewed by Johanna Luttrell, 2017

In her work *Democracy and Inclusion*, Iris Young stressed the importance of narrative and storytelling in democratic participation. For Young, democratic decision-makers have a duty to listen openly to people's testimonies, attending to the diverse manner in which people express themselves, and not to constrain the content of these messages through false standards of legitimacy in form. Diana Meyers's new book expands Young's magnanimity beyond democratic theory to international human rights. *Victims' Stories and the Advancement of Human Rights* unravels the cognitive hurdles that can undermine respect for victims' credibility. Through careful interpretation of accounts of child soldiers in Sierra Leone, rape victims in Bosnia, and prisoners at Guantanamo, among other stories, Meyers argues that by evoking emotional responses and empathy, victims' stories can carry normative significance and bolster commitment to human rights.

The first and most significant hurdle to respecting victims' stories is the expectation that there be a perfect victim. This unrealistic victim, Meyers explains, usually takes one of two forms: the pathetic victim or the hero. Pathetic victims have completely lost their agency; they are utterly helpless and subject to the total control of others. Alternately, heroic victims maintain their agency, but always in a completely virtuous and nonviolent fashion; the hero is never in despair. Both of these unrealistic victims share the exacting criteria of absolute innocence. The first showing of human moral frailty is grounds for victim-blaming, which the listener dispenses swiftly. Meyers speculates that this judgment comes more easily when the consumers of victims' stories feel helpless to intervene, where victim-blaming is a sort of hermeneutic coping mechanism. The fallacy is that, where no perfect[ly innocent] victim exists, no human rights have been violated. Through a careful reading of victims' stories, Meyers outlines the ways in which victims exhibit limited and meaningful agency even when they are being coerced or forced. "Victims," she writes, "should neither be despised nor glorified" (215). Thus, Meyers gives a conceptual roadmap for understanding degrees of agency in victims' stories without demanding that, in order for human rights to be achieved, this agency be inhumanly virtuous. Meyers's reframing is absolutely critical in an age that, for example, seeks to parse the tragic few, "truly deserving" refugees from the masses of economic migrants.

The other hurdles that prevent respect for victims' stories are false standards of narrative form, denial of a normative connection to emotional responses, and a suspicion of empathy's efficacy. Meyers expertly clears the landscape of all such obstacles. Victims' stories can appear on the scene as disjointed and incomplete, not conforming in any way to standard narrative forms. For example, in contexts of genocide, there may not be a "normal" world from which subjects emerge, against which their lives can be compared. However, that these literary works, their silences, codas, and new expressions require interpretation does not mean they are devoid of moral force or meaning. Importantly, the lack of available language for victims to contextualize their experience of abuse may not be due to the victims' expressive capacity, but rather to the readers' implicit bias, or, more radically, to the need to expand human-rights protections in the first place.

Against current philosophical trends that cast aspersions on empathy's relation to moral interest and action, Meyers posits that empathy does in fact do the work of linking author to reader, especially where such conceptual voids exist. Empathy, for Meyers, is neither a complete *ectasis*, a losing of oneself in the perspective of another, nor is it a limited, merely self-centered capacity. Rather, it is a mediating tool between a first- and third-person perspective. Empathy can succeed in transforming one's value system. Further, "well-wrought victims' stories can mediate corporeal differences and enable differently embodied individuals to grasp alternative normative realities" (145). Meyers's account of empathy is one that acknowledges difference: there is an experiential gap between the victim/author and the listener. A human-rights narrative can partially bridge that gap by highlighting common elements of humanity, which in turn expands the reader's understanding of both the trauma involved for that individual and gives a critical insight into how human-rights regimes need to be enforced and expanded. Meyers distinguishes between empathy and emotional contagion, the latter of which is not a moral response. Neither is empathy, for Meyers, merely sizing a person up, understanding what a person is going through without, in some measure, also feeling with that person. Nevertheless, Meyers does not set as high a standard of empathy as others, like Catriona Mackenzie and Peter Goldie, do. One does not have to feel identically to another person, in the intensity of their emotion, or consequentially understand the totality of their experience, in order to be empathetic in a meaningful and moral way. When a reader succeeds in respectful listening, empathy, for Meyers, does a sufficient-but-imperfect job. Readers/listeners understand *enough* of another person's experience in order to act in solidarity, and, crucially, expand and improve the scope of human rights.

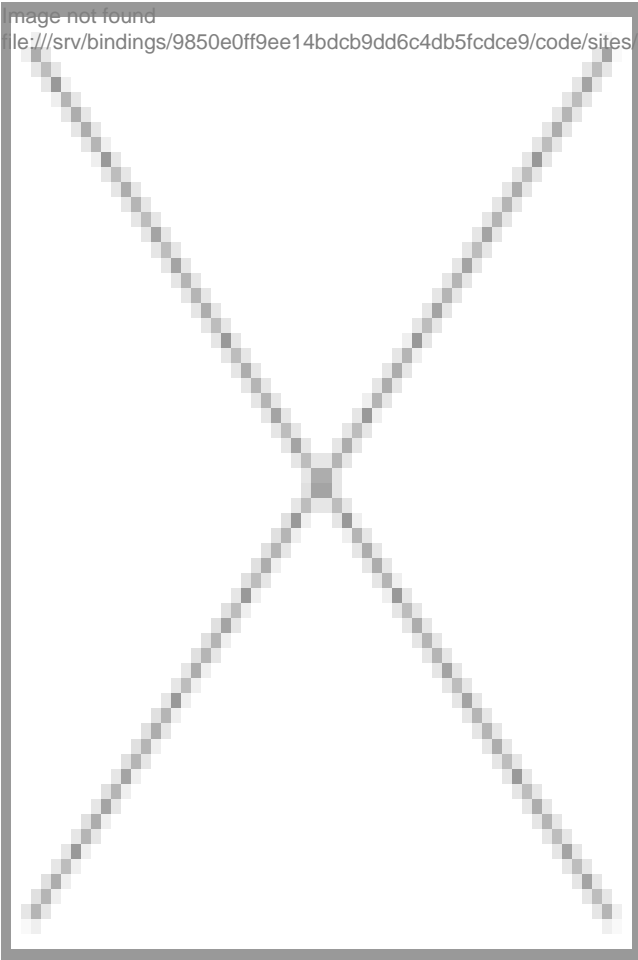
Meyers's departure from Sonia Kruks on the matter of empathy is especially interesting. Kruks believes that empathy is limited by embodiment, specifically, gendered embodiment. Thus, Kruks finds herself imagining violence against women more viscerally than violence against men. Kruks finds it easier to empathize with women's stories of victimhood than men's. Meyers responds that she does not share Kruks's asymmetrical reaction: seeing anyone's battered face, no matter the gender, would elicit the same sort of horror. Human rights are universal. There is more at stake, however, in gendered economies of empathy than Meyers gives credit for here. In addition to differences in embodiment, which Kruks takes as more significant than Meyers does, there are also differences in power. Due to culturally specific demands of masculinity, it is, in many cases, more culturally appropriate for everyone to empathize more with women. This bias is a sad fact that undermines men's sympathy even for themselves when they encounter violence. Furthermore, there is a symbolic association between masculinity and violence, one that can propel men into violence while at the same time preventing them from acknowledging its full trauma. Thus, although I agree that empathy

does, in the end, have the moral power that Meyers attributes to it, she needs to first give more credence not only to the ways in which empathy can be limited by embodiment, but also by power and systems of oppression. Empathy gaps exist in intersectional ways as well; beyond being limited by gender, they are limited by race, class, ability, and so on. That these economies of empathy exist is a descriptive fact, of course, and not a normative ideal, but the descriptive facts nevertheless shape current human-rights limitations. Meyers first needs to name the problem, in this case, how gender standards shape empathy, before empathy can do the work of bridging experiential gaps. Being empathetic to victims' stories sometimes involves understanding the ways in which they could not empathize with themselves.

At any rate, Meyers's book is a critical bulwark against the encroachment of respectability politics into human-rights work. She is right that it is wrong to expect that human-rights victims exhibit superhuman virtue, or inhuman passivity, in order to be heard. The ways she explains agency here is refreshing, in an environment that demands that victims be completely innocent or else they are not victims. For Meyers, victims are allowed to react to their unjust treatment through the full spectrum of relatable human emotions, including anger, despair, hope, and love. Further, empathy does indeed have the power to expand and enforce human rights. Meyers also appropriately worries about how researchers and human-rights workers tend to "steal" the stories of victims: collecting their narratives and using them for their own gain. This pattern of misunderstanding victims' narratives is one that transnational feminists worry about quite a bit. In being retold through the lines of international NGOs and media organizations, victims' stories can be put through a strange game of telephone, where the original agency of victims and their allies gets erased, and in place we find familiar and exploitative savior narratives and calls for pity. Meyers warns against a tragic and exploitative sentimentality in retelling victims' stories, retellings that have the effect of merely confirming that the world is a horrible place. These sorts of sentiments are fuel for disingenuous despair or quietism, especially, I have found, with students. Pedagogically speaking, victims' stories need to be communicated in a way that both acknowledges victims' agency and gives the readers/listeners something to do, afterward, in terms of acting to expand and enforce human rights. Furthermore, Meyers reiterates the importance of high ethical research standards with regard to informed consent and avoiding retraumatization.

The strength of Meyers's account is that it begins and ends in experience. It does not, first, take formal or theoretical human-rights standards and try to "fit" them into the experience of victims. Rather, she takes victims' experiences, as told in their own voices, and sees how human-rights norms both account for and fail to account for their stories. Indeed, her work lays the groundwork for hearing victims' stories in terms as close to their own as might be possible.

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