

## Philosophy in Review



# Peyman Vahabzadeh, "Violence and Nonviolence: Conceptual Excursions into Phantom Opposites."

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Volume 40, Number 4, November 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074034ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074034ar>

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Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Shafick, H. (2020). Review of [Peyman Vahabzadeh, "Violence and Nonviolence: Conceptual Excursions into Phantom Opposites."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 40 (4), 165–167. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074034ar>

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**Peyman Vahabzadeh.** *Violence and Nonviolence: Conceptual Excursions into Phantom Opposites.* University of Toronto Press 2019. 360 pp. \$95.00 CAD (Hardcover ISBN 9781487504175); \$39.95 CAD (Paperback ISBN 9781487523183).

*Violence and Nonviolence* contributes to an emerging political literature on the concentricity of violence and nonviolence (See also, Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, *Violence and Political Theory*, Polity 2020; Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, Verso 2020; and James Dodd, *Phenomenological Reflections on Violence*, Routledge 2017). The various tensions within this literature notwithstanding, one theoretical standpoint holds it together: the rejection of the notion that violence and nonviolence should be approached as two mutually exclusive phenomena. In this book, Peyman Vahabzadeh takes a step back from that position to ask: how, why, and with what consequences is that notion of mutual exclusiveness normalized? And how does this normalization affect the possibilities of imagining and enacting a less violent world? Addressing these questions, the book proffers a critical phenomenology of the pervasive conceptual distinction between violence and nonviolence.

Vahabzadeh conceives this distinction as essentially liberal: a consequence of a Hobbesian myth that juxtaposes the peaceful order of nation-states with the chaotic order of the state of nature. For Hobbes, the state came about as a solution to the violence-breeding anarchy that characterized the lives of the savage man, in which the absence of a sovereign power that governs the distribution of resources resulted in a state of ‘war of all against all.’ This mythical history facilitates a neat distinction between a violent anarchy and a nonviolent liberal order. And it is through this neat distinction that liberal governmentality is made acceptable, and indeed commendable, as an essential system of social pacification.

Yet the other face of that acceptance is the acceptance and normalization of the violence of the liberal governance itself. Vahabzadeh classifies this violence into three overlapping categories: the institutional, the structural, and the hubristic. This tripartite conception is the starting point from which the book pursues both its critique of dominant theories of political (non)violence and its theorization of a corrective phenomenological approach. The unpacking of its main arguments, therefore, starts from the unpacking of those three categories of violence, which I briefly do below.

Institutional violence shows itself in the systematic reduction of individuals into ‘compartmentalized beings.’ Essential to bureaucratic management, representational governance, bio-politics, and liberal democracy, the institutionalization of our existence as individuals *violates* our uniqueness. This violence manifests itself quite visibly in the alienation of societal anomalies, like racialized, disabled, queer, and other minority subjects, in a world structured on the normativity of ‘the majority.’ But we should also be reminded that this ‘majority’ construct is a product of the systematic denial of individual variance, and hence commits violence—with varying degrees, of course against members of privileged groups as well.

The structural violence is manifested in and reproduced by the systems of production, including symbolic and epistemic production, that constitute our life-worlds. Most common references to this category of violence indicate capitalism, ethnocentrism, androcentrism, and speciesism. However, we should be reminded that the bracketing of structural violence into preset categories (‘isms’) is in itself a violent act of structural exclusion of victimizations that do not conform with the structural categories of the critical discourse.

Finally, the hubristic violence is the violence that keeps these systems in place, not only by punishing those who resist them, but by celebrating and valorizing their punishment. It manifests

itself in several customary acts of the state: like legal murder (death sentences), incarceration, war, and anti-labour violence. It is also evident in acts of revolution; like riot, sabotage, and vengeance. These acts keep the violence-breeding system in place; as it extends the normality and gaiety of violence, while merely changing its targets and perpetrators.

In all three categories, violence is entrenched in its systematic denial. The presumption that nonviolence is a territory that is external to violence, and which accordingly could be simply immigrated to by transforming society beyond the current violent state, reproduces violence by rendering it invisible in a [liberal] society constituted on the supposition that this transformation was already achieved. It is only through the theoretical excavation of the implicit violence in modern liberal systems (like bureaucracy, anthropocentrism, and law) that contemporary societies came to their positions of recognizing and hence contesting these violences. This could indeed be regarded as one of the main achievements of modern political theory. Nonetheless, Vahabzadeh warns, we should not rush into celebrating our achievement so fast; for the essence of the problem itself remains intact. That is, the systematic denial of violence implicit in institutions, structures, and traditions that are modeled on the presumption of their transformation of the violent state of being.

The amelioration of violence, therefore, could only be achieved through the insistent rejection of any presumption of its transformation. Through a post-Heideggerian reading of Gandhi, Vahabzadeh affirms that an effective theory of nonviolence should begin from the premise of ‘the ontological primacy of violence’ (60). This premise is not positivist, but normative. It does not indicate a factual impossibility of a social order in which violence is absent. Rather, it indicates that, for the attainment of this order, society *should* model itself on the presumption that violence is always immanent. This model rejects the idealistic presumption that peace is the natural state of being. It also rejects the Hobbesian conception of human nature as essentially violent. It simply rejects the metaphysical question of ‘nature’ altogether, be it the nature of the human, the nature of the state, or, at the core of it, the nature of the act. Instead, it focuses on the consequences of the act, including the act of thought in which the determination of ‘whether an act is violent or not is a function solely of its consequences’ (64).

Consequentialism, however, could equally be prone to metaphysical presumptions. Once the limits of human knowledge, agency, and decision are considered, the tracing of the consequences of an action becomes hardly possible without making ontological assumptions that are beyond the action itself. Vahabzadeh, thus, is eager to distinguish his phenomenological approach from mere consequentialism on two main levels.

First, he stresses ‘liminality’ as a characteristic of being that must not only be acknowledged, but also seized as an opportunity of radical reflexivity. If the essence of society is always in a state of in-between-ness, then there is always an opportunity to utilize the multiple and conflicting positionalities the society is simultaneously embedded in within any given temporality to expose structural, institutional, and hubristic violences that are not immediately seen from the worldview of the dominant epoch. The multiple existences within the same society, that is, the multiple epochs in which it is embedded at the same moment, facilitate the deconstruction of each epoch through the other. The possibility of consequentialism is conditioned by the fixation on a particular epochal logic. Vahabzadeh’s phenomenology rather encourages the resistance of such fantasy of epochal fixation to indulge in and intellectually utilize the liminality of human existence.

Second, Vahabzadeh also encourages the acknowledgment and utilization of the fact that (non)violence is inherently ‘experiential’: intelligible only through a process of meaning-making. If the implication of human action is partially a function of its meaning, then part of what the action does could be constituted, or rather subverted, through the intellectual imagination of alternative

meanings. This does not mean that violence could be simply spoken out of existence. Yet, it means that the resistance to normalized violence begins from an imagination of a society where relations are reconstituted to de-normalize it. Whereas the liberal imagination largely de-normalizes confrontational violence, it normalizes in return a broad variety of institutional, structural and hubristic violences. An imagination that de-normalizes these violences as well is thus imperative. This imagination, however, should not stem from a metaphysical conception of transformation or transcendence, but a phenomenological engagement with human action and its experiential consequences.

*Violence and Nonviolence* is one step on that turbulent road of alternative imagination. Its comparative advantage lies precisely in its subversion of this turbulence from a limitation of social possibilities to an opportunity for a radical reflexivity that expands such possibilities. As such, it shifts the scholarly analysis of the concentricity of violence and nonviolence from that of warning about the permeability of violence in seemingly nonviolent structures, institutions, and traditions, to that of emphasizing the immanent possibility of nonviolence, not as a transformation of the violent order but as a process of its ceaseless reflexive deconstruction.

As such, the book challenges the dominant liberal conception of nonviolent resistance as a transcendent project, paving the way for a more realistic understanding and praxis of political non-violence. As a student of social movements, I find this nuance critical to both the analysis and the practice of civic activism. The book is also an invaluable contribution to political theory. Engaging with a wide variety of modern theorists, including, among others, Arendt, Butler, Fanon, Gandhi, Tolstoy, Derrida, Foucault, Galtung, Agamben, and Schürmann, the book offers an extensive critical review of political literature on violence; together with an original phenomenological perspective that expands both the theoretical and the normative contours of this literature. The book, therefore, opens up an intellectual venue for a much-needed societal dialogue on violence/nonviolence that brings together political activists and political theorists.

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