

2020

Book Review: Violence and Nonviolence: Conceptual Excursions into Phantom Opposites

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Recommended Citation

McGraw OSB, Rene (2020) "Book Review: Violence and Nonviolence: Conceptual Excursions into Phantom Opposites," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, 81-84.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69755/2995-2212.1046>

Available at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol4/iss1/11

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Violence and Nonviolence: Conceptual Excursions into Phantom Opposites. by Peyman Vahabzadeh. Toronto, Canada. 2019. pp. 342. ISBN 978-1-4875-0417-5 (Cloth). ISBN 978-1-4875-2318-3 (Paper).

The reader is first struck by the immense bibliography of the author, Peyman Vahabzadeh. The author is well-acquainted with both the relevant peace studies literature and philosophy. In addition he has a section where he comments on two of Tolstoy's short stories "Ezrahaddon of Assyria" and The Three Questions."

The fundamental strength of this book is its character as a literature review of the topic from a philosophic perspective. Its fundamental weakness is its character as a literature review of the topic from a philosophic perspective. The book contains so many brilliant examples of people who have written and talked about violence and nonviolence that it is easy for the reader to get lost and neglect the overall thesis of the author.

So what is that thesis? "The thesis of this book can be summarized as follows: properly understood, violence and nonviolence are originally revealed in human action (and subsequently manifested in institutionalized activities and through legal and/or administrative procedures) within the epochal and structural ambits that contain us" (p. 3). For Vahabzadeh, violence begins to show itself as simply the result of **action**, simple human action. But that simple beginning in action then extends to a desire to control the world around the person of hubris or the hubristic nation, while at the top of the ladder we come to systemic institutions and structures for the control of a family, of a group, of a nation, and even ultimately of a world. And so we get an addition to the fundamental thesis already quoted: "*From the point of view of acting, violence and nonviolence are often distinct but are not opposites*" (p. 63). And just a paragraph beyond that, Vahabzadeh writes "'No human action with an impact on another existent (human or non-human) is *purely* violent or nonviolent" (p. 63). And ultimately, we arrive at a fairly clear description of where he is leading the authors he is attempting to understand: "...Ultimately, violence and nonviolence cannot be clearly distinguished, and when it comes to liberation, the distinction becomes ever more impossible to uphold, however noble our intentions and efforts" (p. 137).

I want to follow a pathway here which leads from Arendt through a small vignette in the midst of Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* to Gandhi, from action to the death of a little boy in Dostoevsky's vignette, and on to liberation and Gandhi. I will try to be faithful to Vahabzadeh in this description, but at the end I will try to briefly assess the journey that Vahabzadeh has taken. And, more importantly, where is he leading the reader?

Action. A little boy, eight years old, in Dostoevsky's novel is lazily throwing stones. Not big stones. Not aimed at anything. Just being a little boy. One of the stones lightly hits the paw of the owner's favorite hunting dog, the day before the big hunt is to commence. The owner is outraged, though the dog keeper assures him that the dog will be just fine in a day or two. Still the owner cannot contain his rage. The boy is locked up in a shed for the night.

The next morning the landowner has all the serfs summoned. He places the mother of the little boy in the front of the crowd of serfs. The boy is fetched from the shed. And then on this cold

morning in autumn, he has the boy stripped. “Run,” but the boy is confused. Finally others help the boy to run. After he has gone some little distance, the owner shouts to the dogs: “Get him.” They catch him, pull him to the ground, tear him apart, while the mother is forced to witness the killing of her boy.

The boy throws a rock. His action changes the world a little bit. His innocent action has made a small dent in the world of the landowner. **Every action for Arendt and Vahabzadeh invades the world of others. An action is inherently violent. We cannot help but be violent if we act at all. We interfere with others.** And so the injured landowner reacts to punish the boy, the mother, the serfs and the servants who watch.

Violence is the fundamental law of our world—at least at first. Indeed, as Arendt describes in the essay *On Violence* any action has reverberations like a stone skipped in water. The consequence may be infinitesimal, but the world has experienced a Swerve, and things will never be the same. What initially was a boy throwing a stone creates ripples that go on and on. Point #1 of Vahabzadeh. The world created by action **always oppresses some people, deprives them of freedom. Like the little boy they are locked into the prisons set up by the people who may want in a hubristic way to expand their domination over others. And eventually they seek to institutionalize and reshape the world to prevent little eight year old boys from throwing stones.**

Then the landowner is deprived of running his estates. But nothing more. And the hubristic growth of his domination is institutionalized—to keep the peasants down. For Vahabzadeh, no matter what the serfs do, whether they kill the landowner, whether they seize arms and start a bloody revolution, or whether they seek to defeat the institutionalized oppression by nonviolent action—it’s all violent. Even the nonviolent action is violent, since it is oppressing the oppressors.

This reviewer finds pp. 305-306 frightening. All the way up to that page, even while disagreeing with Professor Vahabzadeh on his interpretation of Arendt and Gandhi, my mind was expanded by thinking of action as necessarily oppressive. For all action interferes with others, at least to a tiny degree, and sometimes to a very extensive degree. But then comes p. 305.

Let me quote most of the paragraph near the bottom of p. 305. “I do not uphold the view that ‘human nature’ is peaceful, caring, cooperative, or loving because **I avow no philosophical anthropology.** Nor do I subscribe to the notion that moral and civic education (whatever that term means) will cultivate nonviolence and respect for others....I hold this observation [of Joseph Boyden who states that humans are ‘prone to fits of great generosity and even greater meting out of pain’] as the most matter-of-fact truth. A phenomenology of violence proposes to abandon the anthropocentric idea that the survival of humanity constitutes the ultimate measure of violence and nonviolence, yet humans are the only ones with incredible power to inflict unimaginable pain on or to care lovingly for one another as well as non-humans” (pp. 305-306).

In the next paragraph on p. 306, Vahabzadeh waves goodbye to ethics and to all rules for nonviolence. Gone too is any metaphysics of the human. There are no bars keeping humans

inside the belief that one should not kill or rape. Vahabzadeh admits that his defense of nonviolence is a weak one.

So let us pass to the Professor's understanding of Gandhi. What excites Vahabzadeh as he reads Gandhi is the notion of *liberation*. He sees that Gandhi is using *Satyagraha* to incite a response from the oppressors. And the desired response from the oppressor, according to Vahabzadeh, is violence. For violence used against the oppressed will give those who are protesting a renewed self-confidence to continue their struggle. Nonviolence sounds suspiciously like a pure strategy, with no particular love manifested toward the oppressor. Vahabzadeh would have Gandhi saying to the oppressive bully, "Come on, throw your rocks, take out your guns, I won't run, I'll stay here, till death do us part." What that shows is a magnificent disdain for whatever the oppressor can dish out. Liberation makes the person human and free, but it has little to do with nonviolence, according to Vahabzadeh.

Vahabzadeh quotes joyfully, as do many commentators, the opening paragraph of *The Two Swords* of Gandhi.

I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence. Thus when my eldest son asked me what he should have done, had he been present when I was almost fatally assaulted in 1908, whether he should have run away and seen me killed or whether he should have used his physical force which he could and wanted to use, and defended me, I told him that it was his duty to defend me even by using violence.

But I believe that non-violence is infinitely superior to violence, forgiveness is more manly than punishment. Forgiveness adorns a soldier. But abstinence is forgiveness only when there is the power to punish; it is meaningless when it pretends to proceed from a helpless creature. A mouse hardly forgives a cat when it allows itself to be torn to pieces by her. I therefore appreciate the sentiment of those who cry out for the condign punishment of General Dyer and his ilk. They would tear him to pieces, if they could. But I do not believe India to be helpless. I do not believe myself to be a helpless creature. Only I want to use India's and my strength for a better purpose.
<https://www.mkgandhi.org/mynonviolence/chap01.htm>

What I find immensely troubling in so many commentators on this passage of Gandhi is that the first paragraph is quoted as evidence of Gandhi's ambiguous thoughts on violence. But the second paragraph is almost never quoted. It is quite clear that he is recommending violence only if the questioner sees no other action possible except cowardice. For at least violence for the sake of truth is a step closer to the unchanging truth, but better than either is the realization that nonviolence is far superior.

Final Thoughts

Helpful aspects of Vahabzadeh's thought

- Vahabzadeh has provided a helpful reading of most of the relevant literature, with perhaps the exception of missing the work of Emmanuel Levinas.
- Embracing Arendt's insight, Vahabzadeh has shown that action *can be* violent for Arendt, and *is violent for* Vahabzadeh.
- Vahabzadeh stimulates thought and discussion on the issue of nonviolence. He shows quite cogently the further need to examine the relation between the *action* of Arendt and violence and nonviolence.

Further Considerations Needed

- Is it necessary to throw out ethics and metaphysics?
- I believe that the whole of Gandhi's thought is unwaveringly fixed on truth as the core practice of the Satyagrahi. I find only a small number of comments about truth as it relates to Gandhi in the work of Vahabzadeh.
- I believe that a more complete concentration on e.g., Arendt and Gandhi would clarify how action is fundamental for understanding Arendt and how the religious and ethical thought is central for Gandhi.
- I believe that there is a very strong difference between Arendt and Vahabzadeh on the notion of violence with an implement.
- Is the binary concept of violence and nonviolence to be rejected entirely?
- I feel that Gandhi is quite clear that the basis of his thought on violence is ethical, and inspired by his concern for life.

Suggestion: I believe that the book would be much stronger if it were to concentrate on Gandhi and Arendt and on the author's own thoughts.

Recommendation: The book is recommended for undergraduates who are deeply immersed in philosophical thought, as well as in the structures of violence and nonviolence. Secondly I would recommend it to readers who have received their MA and/or PhD in philosophy and have a good working knowledge of the relevant peace studies literature. That might be reversed so that I would recommend the book to people with a PhD or MA in peace studies, but with a strong background also in philosophy, especially in phenomenology.

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