Ann V. Murphy

Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary

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Reviewed by Lisa C. Knisely

Narrated by Kelsey Borrowman

"Central to Murphy's argument is the fact that both invisibility and visibility, representation and erasure, and recognition and abjection are all currently being rendered as scenes of violence."

Ann V. Murphy's *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary* is a concise and insightful exploration of the motif of violence within twentieth- and twenty-first-century continental philosophy. The book devotes specific attention to the role that images and metaphors of violence play within contemporary continental feminist ethics. In the first half of the book, Murphy examines attempts to bring violence under critique within an iconographic landscape that is littered with figures of violence. In the second half, Murphy turns her attention to an examination of the tension that arises when feminist philosophers attempt to move from ontologies of corporeal vulnerability to the domain of normative ethics. Together, the two parts of the book take seriously the force that images of violence hold within the imaginary of contemporary continental philosophy. Murphy critically examines the privileging of such images while also acknowledging their undeniablity (7). She does not condemn continental philosophers for making violence so central to ethical and metaphysical thinking, nor does she imagine that her own critique is somehow immune to violence (7). *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary* successfully accomplishes the task of better elucidating the theoretical terrain out of which we make some of our most significant claims about being and doing.

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In chapter 1, Murphy modifies Michèle Le Dœuff's notion of the philosophical imaginary, arguing that violence has become a way of seeing within contemporary continental philosophy. No longer restricted to the domains of ethics or politics, we now "see through" violence within many of areas of philosophy (14–16). Violence is taken as integral to identity "in one form or another" for many thinkers (20). There are also philosophical discourses that address "the violence of knowledge and reason" (21). In response to such poststructuralist attention to "symbolic" violence, some philosophers insist that our "focus . . . should be devoted to remedying more 'real' and 'concrete' kinds of violence," a thesis that Murphy would be remiss to ignore in a book largely devoted to feminist theory. Murphy rejects this thesis on the grounds that attempts to separate "symbolic" and "concrete" violence from each other "is a practical impossibility" and noting "the rhetorical invocation of 'reality' in feminist theory is frequently a site of violence in its own right" (22). Murphy's refusal to bifurcate violence into the "real" and the "symbolic" well serves her larger meta-philosophical critique. Instead of speculating as to why violence has become so central to the larger philosophical imaginary, chapter 1 points to the ambiguity of the many nebulous deployments of violence as figures through which we do philosophy. Central to Murphy's argument is the fact that both invisibility and visibility, representation and erasure, and recognition and abjection are all currently being rendered as scenes of violence. This reveals, on her account, a certain equivocacy of images, allegories, and metaphors of violence as they are evoked.

Given that violence now helps to theorize many different forms of inclusion and exclusion, the concept performs significant theoretical work. As Murphy notes, "the constitutive violence that marks the birth of the subject--along with the possessive violence of reason that lays claim to the other through knowledge--together constitute a theoretical terrain in which it is all but impossible to conceive of identity and relation *without* violence" (22, italics in original). This point is key in the book as Murphy adroitly marks the many ways that violence has become something of a conceptual placeholder within continental philosophy. She asks us to think about the moments in which violence arises as an apt figure of expression and elucidation.

A significant and overarching claim introduced in chapter 1 and revisited throughout the book is that the ambiguity found in the deployment of violence in the philosophical imaginary reveals the body as a site of trouble within philosophy (24). Murphy also suggests that this ambiguity points to the instability of disciplinary boundaries between ontology, ethics, and metaphysics as violence traffics through and between them (26). The book implies that violence is used in an effort to explain many concepts and is also used to explain their opposite concepts (recognition *and* unintelligibility, visibility *and* invisibility, inclusion *and* exclusion, and so on) and this is evidence not of a logical contradiction, but rather of a troubling at the borders of philosophy. Violence emerges as an explanatory frame at the places where philosophy's own self-understanding inevitably wavers.

In chapter 2, "Philosophy's Shame," Murphy maintains that the common use of images within philosophy help to lend it intelligibility at the same time as philosophy proper disavows the literary as its other. She further contends, following Le Dœuff, that such repeated reliance on images occurs at "the locus of the intersection between the abstract the corporeal" (30). Thus the violent philosophical imaginary rests as a kind of symptom of philosophy's own self-constitution and disciplinarity. As such, Murphy sees little value in celebrating or renouncing the proliferation of scenes of violence within philosophy, situating them instead as signaling moments when philosophy's others (the literary and the corporeal being two) return to haunt its borders.

The chapter continues strands laid out in chapter 1 by examining shame as a philosophical affect, one that both exposes and entraps (33). Murphy contends that shame is performatively enacted within critiques of violence articulated via theoretical discourses that have also been critiqued as themselves violent. For example, phenomenology has been critiqued as "appropriative, violent, natively subjectivist, and disrespectful of the experience of others" at the same time that it has often been deployed in feminist, race, and queer theories that claim emancipatory motives (40). In such cases, then, shame is often present as "a feeling of inadequacy or culpability" as the critical discourse is practiced (41). Significantly, then, Murphy argues that emancipatory political discourses can no longer "claim immunity to violence" and instead

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"critical thinking has taken the form of a more of less perpetual diagnosis of violence in various forms" (42). What this means, however, is left open-ended.

The possibility of imagining a different form of critical thinking, one in which violence is a less central figure, is an implicit but underexplored suggestion within the book. Turning her attention in chapter 3 to the revival of identity politics within feminist theory, Murphy visits contemporary debates over recognition, querying the possibility of "what a nonviolent conception of identity or recognition might look like" (50). Arguing that both identity visibility and invisibility are now understood as marked by violent processes, the chapter briefly examines philosophical literature on "the gaze" as well as the ethics of alterity. The vast majority of the chapter is devoted to a critique of feminist identity politics that gives preference to race and gender because they are ostensibly more "visible" than other identities (such as sexuality and class). Linda Alcoff's *Visible Identities* (2006) and Nancy Fraser's *Justice Interruptus* (1997) are specifically placed under critique for their insistence that race and gender lend themselves more readily to identity-based struggles over recognition (57–61). Murphy warns against giving preference to an identity politics of visibility or recognition on the grounds that such a politics risks entrenching other forms of violence, namely "the violence of objectification and the violence of nonrecognition" (61).

The majority of the second half of the book (chapters 4–6) is devoted to exploring the thinking of three specific feminist thinkers: Judith Butler, Adriana Cavarero, and Simone de Beauvoir. Uniting these theorists is an attention to the relationship between human vulnerability and violence. Each of these thinkers develops an ontology of the human that takes vulnerability or exposure to others as central, highlighting the possibility for, and temptation of, violence as a constitutive aspect of human being. The most significant claim found in regard to this theme is that efforts to move from an understanding of our exposure or constitutive vulnerability to others and toward prescriptive claims concerning violence are untenable. Instead, Murphy insists, along with Beauvoir, that we should not rush to infer a normative ethics concerning violence out of feminist insights about vulnerability.

The discussion leading up to Murphy's culminating attention to Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity in the last chapter is based on four central points, introduced at the beginning of chapter 4 (68). They are: 1) experiences of vulnerability often incite retributive violence instead of impulses toward nonviolent response; 2) there is no prescriptive ethics that can be "mined" from experiences of vulnerability; 3) we cannot ignore the specific ways that vulnerability is manifest in favor of an abstract notion of vulnerability; and 4) the "exposure to alterity that conditions the body's vulnerability. . . solicits an ethical response but [one] that is not prescriptive" (68).

Arising out of these four claims together, the book outlines a contemporary feminist notion of responsibility that is marked by a kind of ambiguous hesitation (98). As Murphy states, "If the body marks an ambiguous intertwining of ethics and ontology, it is not in spite of this ambiguity that we respond to the provocation of the other, but because of it" (99). This is an idea of response-ability attributed in the book most readily to Beauvoir. Indeed, Murphy argues that Beauvoir "not only anticipates but also responds to the contemporary preoccupation with embodied vulnerability in feminist theory" with her ethics of ambiguity (7).

Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary is an essential addition to recent rereadings of Beauvoir's oeuvre, especially her ethical period writings. Chapter 6 convincingly demonstrates that we are remiss in ignoring Beavuoir's thinking about ethical ambiguity within feminist ethical conversations concerned with vulnerability and violence. In addition, the book acknowledges Beauvoir's ethical thinking as a precursor to contemporary deconstructive treatments of violence, ethics, and responsibility (114). This is a point that deserves more attention, as Derrida alongside Beauvoir also seems to have served as a guide in the book's treatment of violence as a contemporary philosophical theme.

Implicitly under critique in the revisiting of Beauvoir's ethics are the traditions of both feminist theory and philosophy, the former for having incorrectly reduced Beauvoir's thinking in *The Second Sex* to a problematic of identity politics, and the latter for too often assimilating the critical insights and theoretical differences of marginalized philosophers into the predominant thought of their philosophical

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contemporaries. That said, Murphy spends no time critiquing previous misreadings of Beauvoir's ethics, offering instead a productive engagement with contemporary continental feminist philosophy through Beauvoir's development of the theme of "ambiguity." All in all, *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary* is a precisely written and important book for anyone interested in feminist ethics, violence, or contemporary continental philosophy.

References

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Lisa C. Knisely holds a PhD in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies from Emory University. She is currently teaching feminist theory and philosophy in the department of Liberal Arts at the Pacific Northwest College of Arts in Portland, Oregon. She is at work on a book-length project on feminist theories of violence from Beauvoir to Butler. More information can be found here: http://www.pnca.edu/faculty/meet/lknisely

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