

## Review Essay

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*Erinn Gilson*

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*Erinn Gilson*

University of North Florida

Ann Murphy's *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary* is a valuable contribution to ongoing discussions in contemporary Continental and feminist thought. Surveying the myriad ways the trope of violence appears in the thought of central figures in the Continental tradition and that of contemporary theorists influenced by their work, Murphy questions the meaning and implications of these images of violence. By her own account, the book is "a sort of 'taking stock'" and a commencement of the process of working through the significance of the themes of violence and vulnerability that have become common in contemporary French thought (117). The book benefits from Murphy's choice to address these issues thematically rather than exegetically; instead of proffering lengthy interpretations of Beauvoir, Derrida, Irigaray, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, or Sartre, she identifies themes whose treatment often invokes images of violence and seeks to highlight converging trends in recent work in feminist thought. The book is divided into two parts, the first of which most directly addresses the theme of violence as it pertains to the project of critique, the experience of shame, and the issue of identity, and the second of which addresses the related theme of vulnerability as it appears in a burgeoning contemporary literature. The topics are unified by a concern about the relationship between ontology and ethics, and the way tropes of violence and vulnerability appear at their intersection or traverse their increasingly blurred borders. Since Murphy's intent is to raise questions and "think through what is at stake in the proliferation of these images" of violence (1), this review will briefly summarize some of her key insights, and then pose a few thoughts and questions that may allow us to continue the process of thinking through these vital issues.

In Chapter One, Murphy develops the central claim of the book: that images of violence serve an enormously significant function in the landscape of contemporary Continental philosophy. We can summarize their significance as comprising three interrelated dimensions. First, Murphy contends that these images are necessary “for the coherence of the theories” in which they are present; images of violence are not incidental to philosophical thought but rather central to it (13). Second, the distinctiveness of images of violence lies in the way they operate as founding tropes; as they appear in contemporary Continental philosophy, images of violence signal the inauguration of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, knowledge and representation, recognition and misrecognition, and so on. They appear at and characterize the transcendental level, and in this way straddle and cross the lines between metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, and ethics. Thus, Murphy maintains, the motif of violence not only shapes how we perceive and think about fundamental issues in contemporary Continental philosophy but, additionally, “is that which we now *see through*” (14). Thus, third, they have a productive dimension; images of violence are not mere recurring themes or alternate ways of representing core theoretical claims, but rather “generate a certain reality” (13), shaping and limiting what is and can be thought and how it is thought.<sup>1</sup>

Despite their fundamental and indispensable role, the images of violence that suffuse philosophy are generally taken for granted, received as fascinating theoretical constructions and requisite background assumptions. Their pervasiveness renders them familiar and mundane, and thus they generally do not appear to us as problematic or worthy of question. Yet, their centrality and ubiquity are precisely why images of violence call for interrogation; if they are so essential to our critical philosophical endeavors, the reflexive nature of critique demands that we investigate their nature, roles, implications, and the meaning of their proliferation (3). In order to have a sense of where such images appear, Murphy highlights three distinct sites where images of violence predominate in the philosophical imaginary of contemporary Continental philosophy: first, in conceptions of subjectivity and identity, which are figured as being formed through necessary and constitutive exclusion; second, in accounts of knowledge and reason, which are imagined as appropriative operations through which alterity is possessed, assimilated, colonized, and thus reduced to sameness, its difference obliterated through the movement of consciousness; and, third, in the very notions of empathy that are intended to ameliorate violent exclusion but which have “come to be indicted as similarly violent” (20-22).

Chapter Two turns to the question of what images of violence in philosophy tell us “about philosophy’s own self-understanding” (16). Murphy takes up Michèle Le Dœuff’s account of the relationship between the philosophical imaginary and shame in order to make the case that philosophy’s reliance on images of violence indicate a persistent uneasiness

with the body and finitude. Le Dœuff's conception of the philosophical imaginary, most simply, refers to a set of common images that operate as an unintentional means of theoretical elaboration. Affectively, in shame, one wishes to flee because one has become aware of one's failings and attendant responsibility, yet one is unable to flee and instead remains riveted to one's self. On Murphy's account, shame as a "theoretical mood" (27) arises because of philosophy's anxiety about its own disciplinary borders and need to define itself by exclusion of "disciplinary others." If, following Le Dœuff, the appearance of images in a philosophical text marks a site of evasion, then the images of violence that recur in the philosophical imaginary are signs of shame about philosophy's own inability to reckon with finitude, the body, and its own disciplinary finiteness and contingency (the way in which philosophy becomes what it is only through the exclusion of its others, nonphilosophy). The discussion of shame and disciplinary exclusion raises one central and recurring question on Murphy's account: what is at stake in endeavoring to contest, resist, or critique violence and oppression from the perspective of and with the theoretical tools of a discourse that finds itself complicit in violence in varying ways? In feminist theory, Murphy maintains, the bind of shame arises because we must work to counter violence on a theoretical terrain that has its own history of exclusions.<sup>2</sup> Shame, however, reveals to us that this violence is not inevitable but neither can it be wholly eradicated; rather it is that with which we must reckon.

In Chapter Three, Murphy takes aim at the implications of violent imagery for our thinking of identity, especially as it is theorized in terms of visibility. Not only can violence be a consequence of both visibility and invisibility but, further, the concept of visibility can itself be utilized in a theoretically violent or exclusionary fashion. The focus of Murphy's analysis is Linda Martín Alcoff's *Visible Identities* (2006), which seeks to recuperate "identity" from critiques of identity politics that regard social group identity as balkanizing, unnecessary, and a hindrance to individual expression and freedom.<sup>3</sup> While recognizing the ambivalence of visibility in Alcoff's account, Murphy takes issue with the claim that race and gender are "'paradigmatically visible'" because of its implications for those aspects of identity that are not deemed visible or visible enough (51). In particular, the focus on visibility is problematic when it comes to sexuality and queerness, which is figured both as hypervisible and as not visible enough in comparison to race and gender. This deployment of visibility results in ignorance of the material effects of homophobia, a suspicion of sexuality because of its purported lack of visibility, as well as an imperative to make desire and sexuality "'become visible'" (58). Moreover, it enables us to overlook the way in which sexuality, sex, and gender (not to mention other significant axes of social identity) mutually constitute one another. Thus, Murphy concludes, prioritizing some dimensions of identity over others in virtue of their visibility "runs the risk of reinforcing certain kinds of violence (both the violence of objectification and the violence of nonrecognition)"

(61). Even in our critical engagement with the concept, visibility is a locus of violence because of what it precludes and excludes.

The second part of the book, Chapters 4-6, turns to the concept of vulnerability, which has developed in tandem in Continental feminist thought<sup>4</sup> with notions like dispossession, passivity, and exposure, and expresses an attempt to theorize “a nonappropriative or nonviolent relation with the other” (23). Throughout these three chapters, Murphy advances the argument that appeals made to the concept of vulnerability cannot be the basis for any ethical prescriptions but rather can only operate as provocations. Vulnerability is often understood as a transitional figure, one that leads from the ontological domain into the ethical and that is thought to generate particular ethical demands, including that of nonviolence. Murphy contests this move on a number of grounds (68): first, experiences of vulnerability often motivate retributive violence rather than leading to the desired nonviolent response; second, reference to vulnerability does not have any particular or substantive ethical or political implications; third, the idea of vulnerability may involve universalizing tendencies that render it uselessly abstract; and, fourth, a phenomenology of touch that highlights the fundamental nature of exposure to alterity (and so is an instance of the discourse of vulnerability) also lacks clear prescriptive content (see 75-79).

Murphy elaborates the first and second of these points in relation to Judith Butler’s recent work; when Butler proposes that “staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability” may facilitate nonviolence responses,<sup>5</sup> Murphy reminds us that “attending to one’s vulnerability can also promote all manner of violence” (74).<sup>6</sup> We might, however, distinguish what Butler means by “attending” or “staying” or “tarrying with” from the kind of attention paid to vulnerability that usually precipitates violent response. Butler’s point is that the way in which many of us deal with vulnerability – and the vulnerability of loss and grief in particular – is precipitous; we do not want to experience vulnerability and so the experience of it induces us to do all we can in order not to experience it again. An uneasiness with the experience of vulnerability triggers reactive, defensive responses. To attend to the thought and experience of vulnerability is to attempt not to be so injudicious, so self-protective, and so inured in a position where one has the privilege of wielding force unilaterally and with little consequence.<sup>7</sup> The intent behind the idea of “attending” to one’s vulnerability is to foster space in which one might see that it is possible to respond to the feeling of vulnerability with something besides violence. Here, though, Murphy’s second point of concern becomes especially salient and resonates strongly with the claims of the first three chapters: staying with the thought of vulnerability does not entail any particular ethical or political prescription, and, indeed, “it cannot do so in the absence of norms that would delineate how the realities of vulnerability are to be taken up politically, and these norms would themselves be injurious” (74). That is, if vulnerability “cannot

in and of itself yield an ethics" (68), then to derive any ethical content from this ontological feature is simply to impose an ethical norm and such a normative imposition would be another form of violence.

The fifth chapter explores the link between vulnerability and violence further via an examination of Adriana Cavarero's ideas of horrorism and ontological altruism. Both concepts – of ontological vice and virtue, respectively – appeal to the unique embodied nature of human beings. The violence indicated by the term "horrorism" refers to an undoing of bodily integrity, to "the *savaging of the body as a body*" (97). The virtue of ontological altruism is founded on the fact that our uniqueness (both bodily, and expressed in speech and action) requires openness to others and "can only ever be recognized in plurality" (89). As the language of ontological vice and ontological virtue indicates, Cavarero's work is a prime example of the complex move from the ontological to the ethical domain. Yet, Murphy notes, for Cavarero as for Butler, there is hesitation about the move from a claim about ontology – that life is precarious, that we are fundamentally vulnerable, exposed to others in a constitutive way, etc. – to an explicitly normative claim (91).

The theme of hesitation recurs in the sixth chapter, which situates Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy of ambiguity as a precursor to the contemporary discourses of violence and vulnerability. Beauvoir's conception of ambiguity likewise straddles the ontological and ethical domains, and offers a nuanced account of the unavailability of violence. It is with reference to Beauvoir's existentialism that Murphy locates her own understanding of ethics on the post-Nietzschean, anti-foundationalist terrain to which it belongs. Ambiguity pervasively characterizes human existence; the simultaneity of our immanence and transcendence renders our condition ambiguous, as does the way in which our own actions exceed our capacity to control them, rendering us passive in relation to what we do. Failure thus lies at the heart of the human condition, but this failure is what makes ethics possible and necessary. The absence of a transcendent ground for ethical prescription means that "ethics are 'ambiguous'" and "always complicit in a kind of violence (104, 105). Consequently, Murphy endorses Beauvoir's call to assume our ambiguity, which means first and foremost refusing to seek to transcend it, and in so doing recognizing the way all norms, modes of critique, and attempts at taking responsibility may very well do a form of violence even as they seek to work against it.

Murphy's meditations astutely point out that there is no "safe passage from the primordial vulnerability and exposure that constitutes the embodied subject to a model of justice wherein this ethical corporeity is universally respected" (74). In the spirit of thinking through these issues, however, we might question her assertion that the "retreat to vulnerability ... does not readily conjure any particular ethical sensibility" or lead to any particular ethical ideal, and do so by reflecting on the rationale behind

developing the motif of vulnerability (75). As Murphy notes, the focus on vulnerability and its ambiguity in recent theory stems from a desire to think about ethical response as embodied, relationally constituted, and as inhering in the basic features of the human condition. In this way, there is a particular ethical sensibility drawn from a turn to vulnerability, one that is decidedly conducive to feminist work and that strongly contrasts with (and contests) the focus on de-contextualized principle, detached reasoning, and “disembodied and disembodied” selves that has characterized much of the history of ethical thought.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the turn to vulnerability, as Murphy’s discussion of ambiguity indicates, is a turn to a pervasive immanent condition in the wake of the dominance of ethical theories that postulate transcendent bases for claims about what we ought to do here and now. Thus, this turn is a way to root ethics in experience and the conditions for the possibility of experience, in specific experiences of instances of vulnerability (grief, loss, bodily dissolution, and the violence occasioning them) and in vulnerability as a generalized condition. Accordingly, the hesitation that Cavarero and Butler evince regarding the move from ontological to ethical might be understood as a hesitation about *the force or nature of the prescription* rather than about whether there is any prescriptive content to be mined from description of ontological features. They hesitate in language, stating that ethical prescription is “implied” rather than “entailed” (83) or cannot be “deduced” (91), because they have no recourse to a foundation that would enable prescriptive claims to be made with such certainty. In this way, the meditations on violence and vulnerability do the important work of shifting the focus of ethical concern away from justification (does feature “x” justify or ground prescription “y”?) and to the conditions that give rise to ethically salient action, feeling, and thought.<sup>9</sup> In calling our attention to the irrevocably immanent terrain of ethics and politics, and in rooting ethics and politics on this terrain, the discourse of vulnerability enables us to consider ethics as a practice of problematizing actual ethical failure and success rather than one of postulating transcendent principles or their justificatory conditions.

Indeed, the virtue of the discourse of vulnerability might be that it can *entail* nothing, can command nothing absolutely or necessarily, but rather requires acknowledgment of the impossibility of such entailment. Yet, vulnerability, in effect, forms the basis for any ethics whatsoever. If we are not vulnerable, we have no need for ethics, and it is because we are vulnerable that we feel any compulsion to respond ethically. Thus, when Murphy notes that “[t]his ontological condition [of ambivalent vulnerability] is one in which ethics finds its genesis, but it is one that no ethics can subsequently undo[.]” she is cautioning us not to consider an appeal to vulnerability as a panacea for ethical failure or promise of ethical adequacy (98). Indeed, if it contained such assurances, if it heralded such certainty, then there would be no need for an ethic. It is only because we can fail – and because this potential inheres in our vulnerable condition – that we can also



succeed.<sup>10</sup> Thus, it is precisely because of the gap between ontology and ethics – the gap that indicates that no logically necessary deduction of ethical principles from ontological truths is possible – that responsibility is possible; it is, Murphy suggests, in hesitation that “responsibility is born” (98).

Yet, in another sense, the gap between ontology and ethics is no gap at all but just an instance of deeper ambiguity. Insofar as any description involves prescription, there is no move to be made from ontological description to ethical or political prescription because to describe is already to prescribe, albeit implicitly.<sup>11</sup> Thus, while Murphy classifies Cavarero’s thought “as a descriptive account or a critical ontology [rather than] ... a prescriptive or normative ethic,” she also identifies it as an “ethical ontology” that “emphasize[s] the intertwining of ethics and ontology” (92, 99). An ethical ontology, however, would refuse to draw such a line between prescription and description because description also functions to create values. As Murphy notes, “the ethical decision emerges as a moment wherein values are constructed” and if values are constructed in description, then an ethical decision has been made there as well (114). Indeed, in many ways the premise of the book is that description possesses normative significance: the predominance of images of violence in our theoretical descriptions has normative implications and weight that warrants questioning. Thus, the question becomes one of the degree and extent of violence involved in the imposition of different kinds of norms. If our choice is between more or less conscious forms of violence – between positing norms and knowing that we posit them (and thus that they are contingent), on the one hand, and seeking to overcome ambiguity by positing an absolute foundation for norms (and thus remaining ignorant of their contingency and our role in their construction), on the other hand – then we ought to choose the violence of continual critique over the violence of an absolutism that precludes critique. If all prescriptions are violent, then those that command absolutely, with certainty and necessity are even more so.

Lastly, I think we need to return to Murphy’s central question: why has the motif of violence come to characterize so many and such diverse phenomena in contemporary Continental thought, and what are its implications? Whereas Murphy focuses on the unconscious significance of these images, we should also reflect on their theoretical purpose. Why do we characterize perception, language, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, norms, and more as “violent”? Why has the imagery of violence – something that seems paradigmatically subjective – come to characterize the pre-subjective, transcendental domain? What do we seek to convey through the use of this imagery? What does the trope of violence occlude? By using the language of violence to describe the formation of subjectivity, among other things, it seems that we attempt to convey a number of distinct ideas. First, that our selves are not shaped fully (or even mostly) consciously or in ways that are within our control, but rather we are brought into being through relations

that temporally precede and exceed us, and are beyond our control. Second, that there is a certain forcefulness (one that is not necessarily coercive) in our formation as selves; those norms that govern the use of language, structure how we perceive, and determine the categories through which we can understand ourselves are impressed upon us through social relations, and their strength or force derives from their pervasiveness and constitutive power. Third, that the formation of subjectivity involves exclusions, prohibitions, and foreclosures; certain paths are closed to us in advance, certain ways of being and those who exhibit them are barred and/or rejected. Although interrelated, these meanings are each distinct; each has a different importance and different consequences. None of them, however, is the functional equivalent to violence, although they certainly comprise necessary conditions for it, and treating them as if they are is imprecise to say the least.

What are the implications of repeated invocations of violence? And, moreover, what are the implications of employing the motif of violence in ways that might evoke the aforementioned meanings but fail to articulate them precisely and discern the differences between them? Murphy proposes that repeatedly discussing embodiment through images of violence might naturalize violence and this possibility is all the more likely when we render violence a transcendental, necessary condition (16). I wish to point out one other, perhaps more mundane, implication of this kind of language and imagery for the way we do philosophy. Tropes like “violence” seem to operate as a kind of convenient shorthand in contemporary Continental thought, referring to a whole literature and series of arguments, and standing in for explication of those ideas. In our unreflective recourse to such tropes, we avoid having to explain what we mean as well as having to explain it those who do not already know the shorthand. We make these references in the same way that philosophers in the analytic tradition name their problems (any cursory glance at the programs of the APA conferences will reveal this phenomenon) and by so naming them create a discourse that precludes understanding on the part of those who do not know this shorthand. Continental theorists, I suggest, use “violence,” among other things, in much the same way: as a catchall code that obviates the need to explicate fully the assumptions being made and the reasons for the terminology, that gets us out of thinking hard about its meaning, and that positions us as ‘in the know.’ For instance, when we speak of the violence of perception, we mean that perception is not the simple, neutral act of receiving sensory information but rather always involves an interpretive framework with its own implicit norms that shapes what we see and how we see it. To say simply that perception is violent, though, fails to engage in the important intellectual work of discerning both how exactly it might be said to be “violent” (Does it induce material violence? Does the experience of being seen in certain contexts approximate a physical blow?) and what the pitfalls of such linguistic innovation might be. It also limits our discourse to

those who understand the reference. Such a move closes off our conversations, making them more narrow and provincial.

The intent of *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary* is to open up our conversations by prompting us to think reflexively about what we do when we engage in philosophical critique and raising a variety of quite pressing questions to facilitate this critical work. Thus, it is fitting that the book offers more questions than it does answers. I hope it will prompt a much needed discussion about why we do philosophy in the ways that we do, why certain tropes and images appeal and dominate the philosophical terrain, what their implications are, and what we as thinkers ought to do with them, through them or in light of them. In particular, I hope others will pick up the threads Ann Murphy has unwoven for us and explore why the motif of violence might have particular efficacy, whether there are any good reasons to retain it in its multiple forms, or whether the force of the term is diluted by its unrestrained, almost promiscuous, use. It is always a good sign when a book opens many avenues for future reflection and work, and *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary* does just that.

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<sup>1</sup> Murphy's general focus is on contemporary Continental philosophy and, more specifically, "French existential phenomenology and post-phenomenological thinkers," and not philosophy in general (2). The observations made and questions raised throughout the book are also relevant to what we might call "theory" in general. In what follows, all references to "philosophy" should be read as shorthand for contemporary Continental philosophy and understood as referring to this more circumscribed philosophical domain.

<sup>2</sup> Most noteworthy, of course, are the historical exclusions of feminism of perspectives that did not fit the norm of white, Western, upper-middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual cis-gendered women. More subtly, though, are the invocations of violence in existential phenomenological thought as well as the indictment of these schools of thought for their occlusion of difference, at the same time as such theory is utilized to critique persistent forms of oppression.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). A core part of Alcoff's conception of identity is its ambivalent visibility: the visibility of social differences such as race and gender makes them real to us, but the dominance of visibility as a paradigm for understanding such differences has the pernicious consequence of naturalizing them (191).

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the work of Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero, see Debra Bergoffen, *Contesting the Politics of Genocidal Rape* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Rosalyn Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002); Lisa Guenther, *The Gift of the Other* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006); Kelly Oliver, *Women as Weapons of War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (New York: Verso, 2004), 29.

<sup>6</sup> Murphy goes on to note that Butler's understanding of the ethical demand that may be inherent in vulnerability shifts slightly in her more recent *Frames of War*; here Butler emphasizes more strongly the differential distribution of precariousness (termed precarity) and calls "for greater attentiveness to this differential allocation of vulnerability and the mechanism that both produce and veil this inequities" (Murphy, 82).

<sup>7</sup> None of which is to say that by attending to one's vulnerability, violence will necessarily be avoided.

<sup>8</sup> Seyla Benhabib, "The Generalized and the Concrete Other" in *Women and Moral Theory*, eds. Eva Feder Kittay and Diana T. Meyers (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987), 154-177.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Urban Walker outlines the "theoretical-juridical model" of ethics, a dominant conception of ethics that focuses on justification, in *Moral Understandings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Cheshire Calhoun likewise interrogates the "ideology of moral knowledge," which focuses on the foundations for and justification of moral judgment, in "Justice, Care, Gender Bias," *Journal of Philosophy* 85, no. 9 (1988): 451-463.

<sup>10</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel, 1989), 34.

<sup>11</sup> Butler meditates on the problems of the erasure of the line between description and definition, and prescription, as well as on the way in which this erasure is not recognized in *Frames of War* (London: Verso, 2009), 154-156.