

The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence
Vol. II, Issue 2/2018
© The Authors 2018
Available online at <http://trivent-publishing.eu/>



BOOK REVIEW:

Tahmasebi-Birgani, Victoria. *Emmanuel Levinas and the Politics of Non-Violence*.
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. 201 pp.

By Ebrahim Azadegan
Department of Philosophy of Science
Sharif University of Technology, Iran.
azadegan@sharif.edu



The PJCv Journal is published by Trivent Publishing.

This is an Open Access article distributed in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial (CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0) license, which permits others to copy or share the article, provided original work is properly cited and that this is not done for commercial purposes. Users may not remix, transform, or build upon the material and may not distribute the modified material (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

Tahmasebi-Birgani, Victoria. *Emmanuel Levinas and the Politics of Non-Violence*.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. 201 pp.

Globally we face violence in the name of God, justice, freedom, or democracy. Revolutions and social movements against injustice usually turn against themselves. It is highly likely that a totalitarian system arises from a movement against a tyranny. During the last century we have established agencies, organizations and unions including the UN itself in order to ensure humanity that violence, genocide and injustice will be observed, diminished and abolished. However, we now not only see the dominance of circumstances that include poverty, race division, and sexual injustice throughout the world but also global tragedies such as environmental pollution and global warming that have gained a prominence in our century. "The upsurge of religious fundamentalism in the South (which has emerged as the dominant form of struggle against neocolonialism), in tandem with the triumphant return of neoliberalism on the back of globalization in the North, has divided the world into two seemingly polar opposites" (p.4). Based on these facts Tahmasebi-Birgani warns us that movements against injustice and oppression cannot be automatically justified. Our good ends cannot make our actions "just". Thus, her main concern in this book is this question: "what is it that makes a political struggle against injustice a just praxis?" (p.5).

She approaches this question through Levinas' ethics of one's irreducible responsibility for the other in order to build ethico-political subjectivity according to which any political movement against any kind of injustice is just if and only if it assumes the modality of sensibility to the rights of the other, receptivity to the other plea for justice, and vulnerability to the call of the other. What makes the subject ready to be sensible and vulnerable to other's plea for justice is the subject's radical passivity. The role of radical passivity of the subject is that it makes her responsible for the suffering of the other. The subject then becomes sensitive to other's pains and problems. Radical passivity helps us to substitute ourselves with the other (54). In defense of such radical substitution in the process of subjectivity Tahmasebi refers to Levinas' idea of "otherwise than being" according to which the subject relation with the other is not based on her being as the "same" as the other but transcends the other as an irreducible being beyond the same. "To Levinas, that which begets subjectivity is neither the question of being, nor the Sartrean question of the subject's anguish, nor a Heideggerian anxiety with regard to death. These moments merely reflect the movement of being within the grounds of its own self-same. The originary question confronting a being is whether one is 'one's brother's keeper'." (55) The subject through openness of her heart exposes her being to the other and to the other's alterity. It is not Heideggerian openness to the world but an openness of the subject's sensibility to the other's destitution, suffering and sensations through an inward process of subjectivity (59).

The irreducible responsibility of one-for-the-other as the basis of Tahmasibi's solution for the ethico-political society (as she extensively explains in the first chapter) aims at establishing ethical peace. The subjects in an ethical community through their engagement in the process of radical subjectivity, in which everyone exposes herself to the absolute alterity of the other, concertize the ethical relations required for a just political praxis. Tahmasebi calls this kind of just political practice the "ethical liberatory praxis" which is based on the subject's radical passivity of substituting for the suffering of the other, a

substitution that does not only require the subject to be just to the other but also demands the subject to rebel against injustice done to the other (113). The other according to Levinas includes all human beings regardless of their actions, beliefs, race and religion. All have a human face worthy of respect even a tyrant persecutor (110). So, Levinas demands us to substitute ourselves for all others including my political opponent while I believe she has done injustice.

But, Tahmasebi rightly asks Levinas “What does it mean to substitute myself for all others if some of these others are causing injustice? Does the work of substitution stop somewhere at the borders of political struggle?” (110). It might be argued that some sort of violence sometimes is inevitable for a liberatory movement against a tyranny to be succeeded. While Levinas warns us that we have to prioritize patience, waiting and suffering to violence and injustice for just purposes, and he says: “The hand that grasps the weapon must suffer in the very violence of that gesture. To anaesthetize this pain brings the revolutionary to the frontiers of fascism.” (110), but, nonetheless, in the case of resisting against atrocities it seems Levinas approves restricted violence as a defense of oneself or the other. We ought to be aware that it is very difficult to minimize unavoidable violence in a just social movement and stand against the infinite ways our mind can reason in favor of violence against a terrible oppression. Many criticize Levinas for his inability to apply his ethico-political theory in Israel-Palestine conflict when he one-sidedly supports Zionism and the State of Israel (173).

It is an experienced fact that when we open the door of violence, even unavoidable and restricted violence, in order to reach the desired victory against injustice, it would be highly likely to be trapped in “the frontier of fascism.” I think any sort of violence, injustice, and torture ought to be categorically forbidden whether it leads to a good aim or not. Our goal, however, just could not bring any justification about our actions (as Tahmasebi agrees). If we let injustice come, we cannot throw it out easily. So, despite the fact that Tahmasebi’s interpretation of Levinas’ ethico-political doctrine in bolding the importance of the *other* is worthy of attention, since Levinas’ account could not tightly be bound the social movements not to sink in the violent unjust actions, Tahmasebi’s main project fails.

In the last chapter Tahmasebi focuses on Gandhi’s movement in India in order to show a real case in which Levinas’s model is applied. Gandhi is one of the thinkers who support social movements based on non-violent struggle against injustice, and care responsibility for political opponents (116). Tahmasebi argues that Gandhian concept of self-less service is very close to Levinas’ concept of irreducible and irreplaceable responsibility for the other. For both of them infinite responsibility of the subject for the suffering of the other is the essential constituent of individuation and identity of the subject (121). Tahmasebi indicates that Gandhi’s substitution for the other has a close affinity with Levinas’: “both offer a decisive break with Western liberatory discourse insofar as they remind us that neither the struggle against injustice, nor the absence of unjust structures, is enough to form a just community.” (154) I agree with her that for Gandhi a non-violent struggle is the only way that a social movement ought to go on, but I think the affinity between Gandhi and Levinas in this point is not as much as Tahmasebi would like to argue for. Since Levinas states that to take evil seriously we ought to use violence against it (111).

Tahmasebi’s book provides a good commentary on Levinas ethico-political theory in order to elaborate his account of our irreducible responsibility to the other. One of the most enthusiastic properties of this book is the concern of its author about the human rights which may be easily ignored in revolutionary movements for democracy or justice against oppressors. I share her concerns and I agree with her that Levinas’ ethics of one-for-the-other as a good guidance can help us to constitute the future political praxis upon it. However, I think Levinas’ ethics requires some modifications in order to consider as the

groundwork of an ethical society. Following Gandhi, we ought to confine our movements to merely nonviolent struggles. I highly recommend reading this book to all students of political philosophy and all thinkers engaged in socio political movements.

Ebrahim Azadegan
Department of Philosophy of Science
Sharif University of Technology, Iran
azadegan@sharif.edu