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Nonviolence unbound, by Brian Martin, Sparsnäs, Sweden, Irene Publishing, 2015, 354 pp., £22.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-91-88061-03-4

This book proposes to undertake a broad assessment of the nature of 'nonviolent action'. Many readers will already be aware of the idea of 'passive resistance', usually a term describing various forms in which an oppressive system or regime can be countered through pacific means. Brian Martin prefers to retain the key idea of activity, rather than passivity, and the result is an inquiry that aims to show the effectiveness of a specific form of agency in contemporary social, political and interpersonal predicaments.

Martin begins from an exploration of the boundaries circumscribing various potentially confrontational situations, and, in particular, he finds three areas that will help determine how he is to approach his central issues. These three are identified as the boundaries of physical violence, those governing 'usual politics', and transgressive forms of linguistic engagement. These will shape the further areas of exploration in the book as a whole.

The boundary question is interesting: at what point does an action become distinguished as violent, causing physical harm? In exploring this, Martin traces a route that goes all the way from things that obviously and by design cause physical harm (throwing stones, say) all the way down to cases that, while looking similar, have become more or less explicitly nonviolent. Thus, to throw a stone against a tank, for instance, looks like an action designed to cause physical harm, but one that is extremely unlikely to do so. However, it remains a clearly aggressive physi-

cal action. Is it the throwing as such that determines the aggression in question? If so, what about throwing things less likely to cause harm – softer materials, even feathers, say? What about blowing bubbles? The exploration here is reminiscent of a standard philosophical problem, usually governed by the question of vagueness. Timothy Williamson (1994) explored this some years ago and, in common with many philosophers, considers what it means in relation to truth claims and, more importantly for the work under review, in relation to judgments that human subjects make.

Martin's book eschews such philosophical exploration, and this works to its disadvantage. Martin replaces abstract reasoning with concrete and empirical examples. While useful for an understanding of the particular case, this always leaves us unable to determine any serious fundamental principles shaping the questions about how we would identify an action specifically as nonviolent. However, Martin uses some particular questions that his case studies suggest in order to offer us the fundamental characteristics of nonviolent actions in various domains. These can be tabulated and include non-standard actions; limited harm in which opponents are not physically harmed; wide or open-ended participation (which has to be voluntary and non-coercive); and actions that are seen to be fair, prefigured and involving highly developed skills in planning and taking action.

These, then, are the terms that Martin uses, fairly consistently, to examine nonviolence in four domains: verbal self-defense, defamation, euthanasia and vaccination debates. In all cases, he seeks out those modes of nonviolent action that are effective because 'they enable more people to be involved at lower risk, and they reduce the threat to opponents, thereby shifting loyalties more easily' (p.80). In other words, nonviolent action might be re-described as non-coercive persuasion – or, yet more succinctly, argument.

This, however, takes us to the core of the book's claims – and its shortcomings. The centre of the book's case must rest upon modes of verbal engagement. These have been explored before – in ways absolutely germane to the issue of nonviolence and its boundaries – by thinkers as diverse as Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas and Slavoj Žižek. Nothing of this is engaged anywhere in this book, to its detriment.

Martin notes that 'conversations are the stuff of everyday life'. We know, from Arendt and from Habermas, that such conversations are never unmarked, and that they may involve various forms of less overtly acknowledged violence. Especially in Habermas (in his *Legitimation Crisis* [1975] and elsewhere), we find a desire for the construction of a rational society, aimed at the maximization of healthy community cohesion and even survival. But such a possibility depends upon the search for the better argument, enjoined by individuals in conversation that must be non-coercive. This forms the core of a debate with Lyotard (see Rorty, 1984), for whom coercion is more likely to be inevitable the more it seems to disappear from visibility. In turn, a consideration of this, explicitly in terms of violence itself, is developed by Žižek (2008) in his study of violence. There, Žižek makes a crucial distinction between the kinds of physical violence apparent in harmful actions (where we can analyse clearly what is at stake, and then take sides if need be) and, much more significantly, what he identifies as the unstated conditions of violence that shape our society and our community as such. That is to say, he is able to indicate that violence is actually the fundamental condition of

everyday life, even in societies that are ostensibly the most peaceful, where 'non-violence', as we might say, is indeed 'unbound', but where violence forms the substratum of existence.

None of this is to be found in Martin's book, which thus loses the opportunity to give his topic its much-needed serious exploration. Instead, we have a mass of detailed case studies for each and every aspect that Martin would cover, and the consequence is that we cannot see the wood for the trees. Yet more importantly, the book often falls to the level of anecdote. Many of these stories are extremely interesting, and do indeed provide the material needed for serious analysis. The philosophical analysis, however, is what is missing here, and the result is a book that cannot quite reach beyond the local to explore the fundamental bases on which we might even need to engage in a nonviolence that is genuinely unbound.

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