

Is Phenomenology a Philosophy of Peace?

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1. Why are so few Western philosophers given to think peace, while instead the philosophy of war – whether implicit in nature, as just or unjust, as part of civil society, as strategic or hegemonic – dominates across the majority of political theory? Those who philosophize peace tend to assume it under a theory of contracts, *détentes*, or a pause in conflict, rather than think peace under its own affirmative condition. Yet there is one line of Enlightenment philosophy, generally the phenomenological line of thought from Kant, through to Husserl, Levinas, and Derrida, that links philosophy overwhelmingly to opening the question of a possible peace. Why does phenomenology tend toward peace?

2. Thomas Hobbes envisions a socio-political matrix where the condition of nature, dominated by the war of all against all, is mediated and therefore stunted by the State. Violence is ambient and pervasive. A matrix is needed to divide persons from persons, to inhibit contact, to put up artificial walls in nature (a city) so that communities and states mediate the animal instinct of war that is instigated by human contact. In this political schema, power (of the State and sovereign) mediates violence. All subsequent contract theory implicitly approves mediation and regulated contact as politically expedient.

Western peace is generally practiced, if at all, as a peace of non-contact, of mediation, of abstraction for the sake of separation. It is a peace of non-confrontation and abandonment – typically it is an abdication of any substantial peace, a peace steeped in the burdens of materiality and interconnection. What of a peace that is not afraid of contact, of face-to-face confrontation, or of people stumbling over one another – is there an idea of such peace in Western philosophy?

3. Kant's "Perpetual Peace. A Philosophical Sketch" (1795) is the most well-known attempt to posit the agenda of peace as the *telos* of Enlightenment political philosophy. Actually the Enlightenment is rife with utopian political philosophies, so much so that Hegel is able to invoke of a State of Right perched at the end of history, using eschatological language carved out of a utopian template, without standing out as particularly radical or farfetched. Indeed there are no lack of eschatological claims for utopia and messianic ends among Enlightenment political theory, which makes Kant's rallying for peace without invoking religion rather unusual. What Kant writes is a cross between a secular manifesto and a governmental bill, with a series of articles proposed either for installation by a republic or as a public harangue to be nailed to the door of the innkeeper who mocked perpetual peace in the first place by associating it with a cemetery.

The locus of confrontation for Kant's argument is not religion but the social versus the natural. Kant concedes Hobbes' vision of human nature as vicious and duplicitous;

therefore “A state of peace among men living together is not the same as the state of nature, which is rather a state of war.”¹ Instead a state of peace must be “formally instituted” (98), which is linked to the development of public right in general. Kant intends to replace eschatology with universalism; peace becomes perpetual by extension to a “universal community” (107) of “cosmopolitan right” (108). It is enforced by a “federation of free states” and “federation of peoples” (102), which are progressive institutions of modernity. Peace as a form of public right limits itself against naïveté by pragmatically pitting one person’s self-interest against another so that all will find it advantageous to submit themselves to the law of the republic to best protect their limited self-interest.

Kant’s perpetual peace is above all designed to prevent inter-state war, leaving the problem of violence (ambient in human nature) to be restrained through a mix of ethical norms and laws. Indeed Kant concedes personal violence so as to win his argument over in the larger stage of the theatre of war. Kant’s federated peace agrees with Hobbes in replacing contact with contracts. Hidden behind Kant’s claim that “a conclusion of peace nullifies all existing reasons for a future war” (93) is the concession that self-interest and viciousness still roam and flourish.

4. Western philosophy, if it thinks peace at all, tends to conceptualize it as both modern and naïve, progressive and fanciful. There is said to be no instinct or nature for peace, only a higher faculty for it. On the other hand, few dispute an instinct for war, especially since, according to Freud, war flushes out the instincts. In the essay “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” (1915), Freud disdains modern war machines but dismisses as moralism the notion that violence can be overcome by civilization, which itself is originally established through violence. “In reality there is no such thing as ‘eradicating’ evil tendencies” writes Freud. “The inmost essence of human nature consists of elemental instincts, which are common to all men and aim at the satisfaction of certain primal needs. These instincts in themselves are neither good nor evil.”² The unconscious goes as far as to call for murder to appease its fear of insecurity and its own death (Freud later re-evaluates this after discovering a death-drive within the unconscious). Freud manages to mount a defense of war in the name of allowing outlets for such instincts. His essay finishes by banishing peace to the wish-fulfillment scenarios of bourgeois idealists. “But war is not to be abolished; so long as the conditions of existence among the nations are so varied, and the repulsions between peoples so intense, there will be, must be, wars” (234).

Freud does link the instinct of love to the instauration of civil society, but tempers any idealism by arguing that love is always ego-driven and reinforced by the pleasure principle. Still, there is room to ask whether there can be a “base” or “low” peace, a peace that enters through the drives – would we just as well call it love? Or does peace always necessitate an overcoming of nature and the drive system? Psychoanalysis

¹ Immanuel Kant *Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Reiss (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 98.

² Sigmund Freud *On Creativity and the Unconscious* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 213.

explains war and violence well enough as embedded in egoistic instincts, and no doubt excavates the unconscious ingeniously. Peace cannot really be accounted for as a drive – but drives can always be overcome by surprise (psychologist Silvan S. Tomkins categorizes surprise as an affect, and affects can circumvent drives, for example, the way shame can short circuit the sexual drive³). The psychology of surprise may be the best strategy to access the premises of peace in the economy of the ego. But there is also something to be said for understanding how affects such as shame and joy contribute to the politics of peace. Interim communities naturally form around the vicissitudes of shame (alcoholics anonymous and victim support groups) and joy (a city that wins a football game). Peace tends to combine both shame and joy in concern over its weakness while elated by its utopianism. Peace is not a drive but it is loaded with complimentary and contradictory affective resonances.

5. Husserl's phenomenology suspends or brackets the natural worldview for a brief moment – this pause in the instinctual drives may be just enough time for an eschatology of peace to slip through. The phenomenological *epoché* is, to be sure, not intended as a political move; the world is first bracketed in order to put empiricism on hold so that the consciousness of consciousness surges forth. But suspension of the everyday experience allows one to conceive of the world in just a slightly different way than the automatic presentation of the world. This suspension allows consciousness to break loose from the dominance of nature, to think beyond its datum.

In Husserl's articulation, it is consciousness turning on itself that is said to interrupt the natural worldview. Phenomenology opens onto an immediate relation between consciousness and intentionality, concept and its intentional object, noesis and noema. However, consciousness is constantly mediating consciousness. This self-consciousness is said to ground reason in its irreducible, self-critical responsibility for itself. Husserl believes responsibility for one's self-consciousness, the fundament of reason, would lead by analogy to responsibility for the life-world. But is self-consciousness the utmost phenomena for phenomenology? Perhaps not consciousness mediated but consciousness interrupted is the first critique of the natural worldview.

6. Emmanuel Levinas is certainly the major philosopher of peace in the Western tradition. He re-orientates the entire phenomenological project around peace as its primary condition. At the same time, he launches one of the more unique criticisms of the tradition of Western philosophy: he accuses philosophy of being too violent to adhere to any truth. It is not enough for philosophy to seek the truth, argues Levinas, but it must do so without the aid of violence. Thus it is peace, just as much as truth, which becomes the central problem for philosophy. Generally violence is assumed to be only a problem for political philosophy, and not a logical or ontological problem. Philosophers typically criticized each other for mistakes in reason or incorrect method, not for thinking too violently. Perhaps only one other philosopher, Nietzsche, supposed that violence played

³ See Silvan S. Tompkins *Affect – Imagery – Consciousness* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1962).

such a prominent role in philosophy, though Nietzsche is quick to distinguish a bad violence, one that works against the will and represses the individual in the name of some asceticism, and good violence which is the expression of the underlying force and chaos of becoming. Yet according to Levinas, violence necessarily stunts all thinking at the level of being.

Levinas claims that violence surges as a consequence of ontology, which insists on persisting in its own being and condemns itself to constant re-assertion of the self-same. By privileging one's own being over any other being, ontology installs the ego as superior and beats thought into a flat sameness in praise of the self. Conceptual unity, harmony of identity, $A=A$ formulizes this sameness. Levinas applies the phenomenological method not to suspend or bracket being, but to show how consciousness unfolds by interaction not with itself but with otherness. Levinas uses phenomenology to lift off from nature but the primary phenomena that is under scrutiny is not the experience of the self but the encounter of the other. Not *raison d'être* but *raison d'autre*.

7. Levinas refers to ethics as a kind of “an-archy,” in the sense that there is in ethics no origin (*arche*), no center point of justification or order. The self is seized at the root of its subjectivity by the call of the other and obeys the command of the other. But can ethics be implemented without laws? An-archy yet the necessity of laws? Yes, but not in the sense that an-archy is lawlessness (*a-nomos*). Rather an-archy is the breaking point at which laws cannot be totalized. Laws left alone to dwell in their legality establishes only bureaucracy. But for the force of law to be kept intact as an ethical resistance, such laws must be subject to interruption, to unexpected surprise, to an-archy of interaction with unpredictable human behavior. Without this tension of an-archy, laws would harden into finite norms. Laws that welcome the unexpected? What does it mean, a law that is built not on the anticipation (and prevention) of the unforeseeable, but on an openness towards the unimaginable? Perhaps something of a permanent reminder of the strangeness of the law itself. A unique Levinassian contribution to legal theory: laws not of precedence or of nature, but of the an-archic surprise of the other.

8. A frequent mistake made in receptions of Levinas' philosophy is to apply ethics straightforwardly to other categories and considerations: ethics and politics, ethics and aesthetics, etc. There is no smooth transition since Levinas' ethics is based on interruption and a-symmetry; ethics is a relation under question, not an easily portable concept. Levinas insists on the non-thematizable and non-conceptual role of ethics, which occurs in the unpredictable contact with the face of another. This does not mean that ethics cannot be an “applied philosophy,” only that its application cannot be scripted by any method or pre-arranged. Levinas applies a “method” that is not simply repeatable and never total; in other words, the method is not wholly methodical. Ethics certainly is not wholly separate from other philosophical discourses, only that ethics does not serve as a synthetic to create an ethico-political regime, rather as a mode of questioning and calling, of interrogation and interruption. Theoretical responsiveness to the *imprévu*

extends to Levinas' political theory, which he articulates against contract theory. For Levinas, contact supercedes or overwhelms any contract.

Yet Levinas' proposition that ethics precedes politics does not mean that ethics washes its hands clean of all *realpolitik*. It is a misreading to find Levinas as marking a strict division between ethics and politics, favoring the one and remaining distant to the other. There is an imperative to act in the political sphere in Levinas' philosophy, although the point is that one can act in the political sphere without necessarily using political actions. Ethics, which does not avoid the political sphere, is not reducible to politics. For politics to have the most potential politics, it must not be reduced to mere politics: "La politique laissée à elle-même porte en elle une tyrannie," remarks Levinas.⁴ Indeed, the most political act is that which goes beyond mere politics. To touch the other's soil, to see their homes, smell their markets, listen to them express their lives – this is the promise of a real *realpolitik*, a politics that would approach the other in the ways he or she understands and lives. A *realpolitik* of the other's reality, not mine.

Still, readers of Levinas are often tempted to banalize his work in the political sphere by promoting it as a "politics of the other." It is a mistake to transpose Levinas' ethics of the other into a simple politics, whereby the other becomes the privileged status of the political, and thus the condition of the political is seen as the sole conduit by which one elevates and respects the other. In Levinas' philosophy, a "politics of the other" would serve to reduce the scope of the possibility of relations with the other. The other cannot be reduced to politics only, she exceeds the very category of the political. Levinas' philosophy is not a politics of the other precisely because it tries to think of the relation with the other in a way *otherwise than* political.

9. Levinas remarks in the essay "Paix et Proximité" that "on peut se demander si la paix n'a pas à répondre à un appel plus urgent que celui de la vérité et d'abord distinct de l'appel de la vérité."⁵ Wisdom inheres in heeding that which is most urgent – philosophy responds to the urgent call of peace prior to the call to truth.

The urgency of peace is what one could call a *non-pacifist peace*. Peace is not defined as the exclusion of all dangers, the purification of all conflicts, the pacification of all things disruptive. Peace that sits calmly within itself slowly eats away at its own strength. Levinas writes, "Voeu d'une paix qui n'est plus de repos en soi, qui n'est plus seulement suffisance d'autonomie, qui n'est pas le discours intérieur du fameux dialogue de l'âme avec elle-même, portes et volets fermés. C'est paix inquiète ou amour du prochain."⁶ Like all things Levinasian – difficult peace! Peace is not a day at the beach. It is not a relaxing evening, nor is it pure joy. Rather, Levinas describes peace as

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas *Totalité et infini* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), 335. Apologies for leaving Levinas in the original French – these are the editions available to me at the current moment.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas *Altérité et transcendance*, (Fata Morgana, 1995), 142-43.

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas *A l'heure des nations* (Editions de Minuit, 1988), 9-10.

worried, nervous, insecure, in constant vigilance. A peace of confrontation, engagement, insistence on continual achievement rather than abandoning peaceful talks over whatever excuse for conflict arises. Levinas' peace requires constant originality, constant uniqueness, surprise of the other even though we knew to prepare for her coming (a complex of surprise, shame and joy). It always wonders if it is good enough, if it has done enough.

10. In an early essay titled "Violence and Metaphysics" (1964), Derrida critiques of Levinas' promise of ethical metaphysics as able to definitively overcome Hegelian negativity or Heideggerian being. Derrida argues that philosophy is always embedded in a discourse that would not exist without a certain negativity of difference and complicity in being that is a play of presence and absence. A truly nonviolent language would have to be a language that says nothing: "Since the verb to be and the predicative act are implied in every other verb, and in every common noun, nonviolent language, in the last analysis, would be a language of pure invocation, pure adoration, proffering only proper nouns in order to call the other from afar."⁷ Ultimately, one would have to do too much violence to language to ban violence from language.

Neither an awed silence nor a strict condensation of language into proper names are pursued by Levinas or Derrida. What both have in common is a pursuit of a new language, a new set of vocabulary and key terms, a series of concepts and description of events that give contour to the condition of peace. Derrida largely leaves behind the theme of madness and cryptonymics of language over the last fifteen years of his work and becomes increasingly concerned with the ramifications of violence in philosophy and in an ethical language by which the condition of a future peace might be understood. For Derrida these terms include tribute, friendship, hospitality, asylum, vigilance, vulnerability, pardon, and the gift. Such terms that may even serve to replace the triumvirate of politics, ethics, and religion – traditionally the primary sites of thinking peace but also just as much for the preparing of war. A longer essay could show how these terms could help build not a utopia but a kind of *critical hospitality* for a future peace.

⁷ Jacques Derrida *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1978), 147.