Review Article

Créitique of Transcendental Violence

Leonard Lawlor


Transcendental violence remains. The attempt to reduce violence to its lowest degree never reduces it far enough to eliminate the violence that is life itself.

Lawlor, From Violence to Speaking Out, 287

Leonard Lawlor’s most recent book, From Violence to Speaking Out, is a work in ethics. Lawlor’s ethics are opposed to every repression of potentiality through the imposition of relative ends. Put differently, he claims that the ethical philosophy articulated in From Violence to Speaking Out “is opposed to all possession of others” (x). Readers are right to infer that the resistance to the imposition of relative ends and the renunciation of the possession of others find their inspiration in Kant, perhaps most pointedly in the second formulation of Kant’s categorical imperative: never treat humanity as mere means to an end. Indeed Kant proves to be a surprisingly influential voice in Lawlor’s latest book.

One way to characterize Lawlor’s From Violence to Speaking Out would be to say that it is a critique of transcendental violence, where the understanding of both critique and the figure of the transcendental are inherited from
Kant. Lawlor’s critique of transcendental violence is Kantian in the sense that it is not a negative critique but rather an exploration of limits. Lawlor’s understanding of transcendental violence is Kantian because it is grounded in Kant’s understanding of the transcendental as the condition for the possibility of appearing in experience. While there is no explicit association of violence and the transcendental in Kant’s own work—that association is made most clearly and perhaps most famously in Derrida’s “Violence and Metaphysics”—Lawlor does appear to subscribe to the Kantian attribution of necessity to the figure of the transcendental, a necessity that is at once generative and restrictive. It creates as it imposes limits. Transcendental violence is the fundamental (and so necessary) violence that lies at the heart of the basic structures of experience. A critique of transcendental violence thus makes requisite a careful definition and conceptual analysis of transcendental violence itself, as well as an examination of those sorts of counter-violence that it may mobilize. If transcendental violence is understood as an unchosen and unavoidable violence, then one cannot sensibly argue for its eradication or even diminution. What kind of agency do we as subjects exercise in reference to the machinations of transcendental violence that shape our phenomenal world and our self-understanding? If one understands transcendental violence in the Kantian sense—as Lawlor invites us to do—then how does one critique the violence that serves as the condition for the possibility of critique itself? How does one loosen the transcendental grip of violence? Lawlor’s consideration of how to minimize the irreducible violence in all experience and expression leads him to pose this final question: what does it mean to speak in the least violent way? Lawlor’s answer to these questions amounts to a genuine and original intervention in continental philosophy and a remarkably timely intervention in ethical theory.

Lawlor’s contribution to the discourse on transcendental violence is profoundly original for this reason: he suggests that a critique of transcendental violence must principally redress the other kinds of violence that are spawned in reaction to transcendental violence itself. By definition, transcendental violence cannot be eliminated. In fact, Lawlor does not think it should be; it is another kind of violence that we must work to minimize. Lawlor’s critique of transcendental violence is grounded in his preoccupation with other kinds of reactive violence that are generated in response. He understands this reactive violence as “the worst violence.” “Transcendental violence is so because it appears in the fundamental structure of experience. As fundamental, this violence cannot be eliminated. The violence irreducible in the fundamental structure of experience motivates reactions, one of which is more and more violence to repress and control what is fundamental in experience” (xi).