

# Book Review

Brij Mohan

**Anat Mater. (2022). *The Poverty of Ethics*. London: Verso Books, 261 p. ISBN-13: 978-1-83976-592-6 (Cloth), L 16.99, \$ 35.95.**

Anat Mater teaches philosophy at Tel Aviv University. Her new book's based on the premise that political discourse "can provide the coordinates for an ethical life under conditions of global injustice." Equality, justice, and democracy are the Left's ethos and essence. Abstract ethical principles end up shaping our "notion of morality." Implicitly, depoliticization of ethical discourse only empowers the dominant, unjust order.

Political pragmatism, Mater argues, must outweigh the airy, feckless ethical constraints if achieving a just civil society is our goal. This book was originally written in Hebrew. This English translation was followed to enhance its wider common consumption. The political and moral condition of Israel and Palestinian oppression by the reactionary forces troubles the author. Her point of view cannot be ignored at a juncture when the holy land of Jews stands at the crossroads. Conservatives' revivalist crusade implies a Zionist imperial order to prevail over the entire Holy Land, including Jordan. Netanyahu has attacked the Supreme Court, which upholds the rule of law within a democratic-secular society. As evident by a massive public protest, the fate of Israel's identity and the future of its democracy are at stake. There is a frightening similarity between India and Israel. Modi is India's Netanyahu; his *Hindutva* movement is a sword and shield to maintain a pernicious dogma.

Israel, at 75, as *The Economist* presents, has become a "Survivor Nation." Theodor Herzl's Zionist movement, initially developed in 1948, was dominated by secular Jews divided into two camps: liberal and illiberal. (Current, *sic*,

Brij Mohan, Dean Emeritus, LSU School of Social Work, Los Angeles, CA, USA. He can be contacted at [brijmohan128@gmail.com](mailto:brijmohan128@gmail.com) and [SWMOHA@lsu.edu](mailto:SWMOHA@lsu.edu).

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“Likud party is the ideological heir of this revisionist Zionist Camp” (The *Economist*, April 29–May 5, 2023, p. 35).

“Philosophy can and should be a crucial component in the toolbox enabling our political struggle,” said Marx (Quoted, p. x). Matar’s stance is emboldened by Kantian-Nietzschean-Derridean strands manifesting a radical change that shifted the power equation. “The intent behind the deconstructive move of shaking up binaries is not to cancel out all difference—rather the opposite.” Matar unravels Derrida’s dyads—the points of primacy and secondariness in the binary of speech and writing—is thoughtfully conceptualized below:

Thus, he up-ends ... metaphysical, epistemological, and logical binaries (reality/appearance, mind/body/, subject/object, fact/value, logic/rhetorical), opposition of linguistic style (literal/figurative, serious/jocular), and political hierarchies (man/woman, Western/Eastern, white/black, and so forth). In fact, an important corollary of this subversion of hierarchies the admixture of the categories themselves, since the very separation of the aesthetic or the political from the metaphysical, the epistemological and the logical is part of the problem, as exposed by Derrida. (Matar, 2022, p. 210)

The author underscores the fallacy of neutrality. Anti-dichotomizing the images of language is considered essential for politicizing ethical discourse. The whole book contains four chapters preceded by an eloquent Introduction. This involves (1) “There is no God, but ....” (2) “Resolve the religious world into its secular basis,” (3) Ethics as meta politics; and (4) Conclusion. In sum:

To reject purism and empty abstraction while refusing the positivist reduction is to accept that concrete political content colors our language and consciousness. My aim is that the moral should be understood at present as a derivative of the left-wing political position which emerged and crystallized in post-feudal Europe, inspired by the ancient roots of European thought (pagan, Greek, Jewish, Christian), and which developed, traveled, and brought about change—and continues to do so—around the world, in many ways. (Matar, 2022, p. 213; emphasis mine)

The *left* and *right* have lost their meanings. The confluence of realities—faltering moral institutions, redundancy of the fictional classic Social Contract, the logical resurrection of the God that failed, falsification of truth to attain raw power—manifests passive nihilism. The book is a brilliant exposition of the progressive movement that the *Enlightenment* triggered. I have written volumes to signify Enlightenment Two’s need to achieve a civically secular society. Democracy cannot be saved if secularism and equality—against religious extremism, intolerance of “the other,” violence, and injustice—are attacked by the reactionaries on the right.

Inconvenient books are being removed from libraries in Florida and Hong Kong. Modi's party in power is rewriting history. Sensitized knowledge often becomes propaganda. Acquiescence to unethical forces breeds passive nihilism. This book enlightens students, practitioners, and readers to raise their voices in support of progressive pragmatism to safeguard ideality and hope.