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Epistemology and Rational Ethics

SAPERERE

Lorenzo Magnani

Understanding Violence

The Intertwining of Morality, Religion,
Capitalism and Violence: A Philosophical
Stance

Second Edition

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Our scientific and technological era has offered “new” topics to all areas of philosophy and ethics – for instance concerning scientific rationality, creativity, human and artificial intelligence, social and folk epistemology, ordinary reasoning, cognitive niches and cultural evolution, ecological crisis, ecologically situated rationality, consciousness, freedom and responsibility, human identity and uniqueness, cooperation, altruism, intersubjectivity and empathy, spirituality, violence. The impact of such topics has been mainly undermined by contemporary cultural settings, whereas they should increase the demand of interdisciplinary applied knowledge and fresh and original understanding. In turn, traditional philosophical and ethical themes have been profoundly affected and transformed as well: they should be further examined as embedded and applied within their scientific and technological environments so to update their received and often old-fashioned disciplinary treatment and appeal. Applying philosophy individuates therefore a new research commitment for the 21st century, focused on the main problems of recent methodological, logical, epistemological, and cognitive aspects of modeling activities employed both in intellectual and scientific discovery, and in technological innovation, including the computational tools intertwined with such practices, to understand them in a wide and integrated perspective. **Studies in Applied Philosophy, Epistemology and Rational Ethics** means to demonstrate the contemporary practical relevance of this novel philosophical approach and thus to provide a home for monographs, lecture notes, selected contributions from specialized conferences and workshops as well as selected Ph.D. theses. The series welcomes contributions from philosophers as well as from scientists, engineers, and intellectuals interested in showing how applying philosophy can increase knowledge about our current world. Indexed by SCOPUS, zbMATH, SCImago, DBLP. All books published in the series are submitted for consideration in Web of Science.

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Revenge is a kind of wild justice, which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out.

Francis Bacon, Of Empire

To my wife Anna

Preface to the Second Edition

First of all, I have to observe that the forms of violence evolve over time and new cases and modalities appear and have to be considered; not only, past analysis and subsequent judgments and illustrations about various cases of violence have to be revisited because the passage of time often casts a new light on them, showing aspects previously hidden and therefore invisible. Indeed, this new edition of the book intends to comply with the needs indicated by the comments above: various modifications have been introduced especially in Chaps. 3 “Moral Bubbles: Legitimizing and Dissimulating Violence Distributing Violence Through Fallacies”, 4 “Moral and Violent Mediators. Delegating Ourselves to External Things: Moral/Violent Niches”, and 5 “Multiple Individual Moralities May Trigger Violence Engaging and Disengaging Morality”. Moreover, two new chapters have been added.

The first one, Chap. 7 “Violently Mimicking the Primitive Accumulation Creating New ‘Enclosures’: The Degradation of Women, Lockdowns, Looting Finance, War, Plunder”, written with the help of my wife Anna Maria Marchini, deals with some violent effects generated by the recent finance capitalism, seen as “new enclosures”, forms of replication of the so-called primitive accumulation, that is the first social and economic step that led to the birth of capitalism. This chapter permits to analyze some new aspects of violence such as the ones related to degradation of women and globalization, marked by continuous and unprecedented assault (as smart social, political, and economic mechanisms for producing enclosures) on the commons, perpetrated by World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, coronavirus Lockdown and, currently, also by the paradoxical economic effects of the interplay between the green era and Ukraine and Israel-Hamas wars and global food and energy crisis. Finally, the last section of this new chapter provides insight on what is called the “terminal enclosure” related to the aggression of the ultimate common good: water.

The second one, Chap. 8: “Doing Violence to the Production of Scientific Knowledge. Impoverishing Epistemic Niches” analyzes epistemic irresponsibility as a growing concern in biopharmaceutical companies, as they face challenges in their scientific research. This irresponsibility is generated by the commodification and commercialization of science, the marketing of technoscientific products, and the consequent impoverishment of the so-called epistemic niches at stake. This has led

to a decline in human abductive cognition and the endangerment of human creativity. The challenges against human creative abduction and epistemological rigor on the part of what I call computational invasive “subcultures” and unwelcome effects of selective ignorance are finally illustrated.

The explanation of the “genesis” of this book is simple. I have always directly seen, in the behavior of violent human beings and in my very own “mild” violent conducts, that they were basically performed on the basis of serious and firm *moral* convictions and deliberations, at different levels of consciousness and multimodally released (cognitively, rationally, emotionally, etc.): I think morality – and thus religion – and violence are strongly intertwined. At the same time I have always seen how human beings tend to avoid to analyze violence, for example liquidating it through a kind of easy “psychiatrization”. To undertake a serious investigation of violence calls for a discrete amount of courage and sincerity: as a human being I can wishfully ignore my own violence, thanks to that “embublement” I am illustrating in this book, but as a philosopher I cannot ignore it, even if – I hope – my “violent” deeds are extremely unlikely to make the headlines!

This kind of considerations triggered the personal exigency of knowing more about violence. Step by step this intellectual commitment had become more and more specific and theoretical, so that I soon thought violence had to be transformed in an autonomous subject of philosophical reflection. Why? Because we have to *respect* violence and – so to say, paradoxically – its “moral dignity” as a philosophical topic. Philosophers (myself included) are used to deal with clear and highly valued subjects like rationality, science, knowledge, ethics and so on, which are supposed to be endowed with an intellectual dignity per se. Philosophers seem to think that violence, *just because it is violence* appears as something trivial, bad, intolerable, confused, ineluctable, and marginal, not sufficiently interesting for them: as a matter of fact, history, sociology, psychology, criminology, anthropology, just to mention a few disciplines, seem more appropriate to study violence and to provide data, explanations, and causes. I was instead convinced that, at least in our time, philosophy is exactly what possesses the style of intelligence and intelligibility suitable for a fresh, impertinent, and deep *understanding* of such an intellectually disrespected topic. When dealing with violence, philosophy, still remaining an abstract discipline as we know it, paradoxically acquires the marks of a kind of irreplaceable and indispensable “applied science”.

I thought that it was time to attribute more philosophical dignity to violence, because violence is extremely important in the life of human beings, whether we are willing to accept it, or not. There is a philosophy of science and a philosophy of morality, a philosophy of biology but also a philosophy of arts, and so on, no reason to philosophically disrespect violence anymore: we must be proud because we are trying to establish a *philosophy of violence*, as an autonomous field of speculation, which can rescue violence from being held captive, like an embarrassing cultural Cinderella, in a poor, fragmentary, and often exoteric collection of philosophical thoughts or cold, just-so, scientific results.

This book might help up acknowledge that we are intrinsically “violent beings”: such an awareness, even if not therapeutic (violence should be explained, and never

explained away), could improve our possibility of being “*responsible* violent beings”. By this I meant that it could suggest us ways of monitoring our rational and emotional reactions, in order to reduce the possibility (unavoidable) of errors and improve our aspiration to acquire a free and safer ownership of our destinies: on a more cognitive ground, this means individuating and, only after that, fortify those *cognitive firewalls* that could prevent violence from becoming overwhelming instead of being confined in just one, or few, dimensions.

I adopted the basic eco-cognitive perspective I had already developed in my book *Abductive Cognition: Epistemological and Eco-Cognitive Dimensions of Hypothetical Reasoning* (Springer, Heidelberg/Berlin, 2009), which took advantage of the results coming from various disciplines, from the area of distributed cognition to the biological research on cognitive niches, from the study on fallacies to the catastrophe theory, merging psychological, social, and evolutionary frameworks about the development of culture, morality, and religion, with the role of abductive cognition in illustrating hypothetical guessing and acknowledging insights from postmodernist philosophy to cognitive paleoanthropology and psychoanalysis.

The first edition of this book inaugurated a new series that I am editing for Springer: *SAPERE (Studies in Applied Philosophy, Epistemology and Rational Ethics)*. As it meant to provide a fresh and provocative understanding of violence, I hoped this book did justice to the aim of the series and spotlight a topic that had been mostly undermined and neglected in contemporary cultural settings.

For valuable comments and discussions I was particularly grateful to various academic colleagues who directly, but also indirectly, furnished various insights and ideas useful to improve my thoughts about violence, and to my collaborators Emanuele Bardone and Tommaso Bertolotti, who also helped in discussing, reshaping, and enriching various sections. Some sections of Chaps. 2, 3, 5, and 6, have been written in collaboration with them: 2.2.2, 3.3.2, 3.5, 4.6 (first part), 5.4, 6.5.2 with Emanuele Bardone, and Sects. 5.3.1, 6.3, 6.4, and 6.6.2 with Tommaso Bertolotti. I am also indebted to my friends Enrichetta Buchli, psychoanalyst, and Giovanni Corsico, psychiatrist, both exceptionally skilled at detecting the violent aspects in the least suspicious of human behaviors, and to my wife Anna Maria Marchini, who wrote the Sects. 7.2.2, 7.3, and 7.5, greatly enriching chapter seven. I also discussed many parts of this book with my wife to such an extent that I can say many sections were written together. This book is dedicated to her, in honor of her sentiment and persuasion that violence has to be considered seriously, also from the cultural point of view. The research related to this volume was supported by grants from the Italian Ministry of University and the University of Pavia. I also wished to thank Louise Sweet, a freelance editor who enhanced my written English. The preparation of the volume would not have been possible without the contribution of resources and facilities of the Computational Philosophy Laboratory (Department of Philosophy, University of Pavia, Italy). I was grateful to Springer for permission to include portions of previously published articles.

Along the book I will use *he*, *she*, *her* or *his* depending on the context. I do not think appropriate to use the now-conventional expression “she” or “he or she” when dealing with violence, which is certainly similar in males and females, but very often has to be more appropriately attributed to males.

Sestri Levante, Italy
February 2024

Lorenzo Magnani

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Chapter 1

“Military Intelligence”



Coalition Enforcement and the Evolutionary Origin of Morality and Violence

1.1 Philosophy: the Luxurious Supplement of Violence

In the paper “Philosophy – The luxurious supplement of violence”, Bevan Catley (2003, p. 1) says

In many of the growing number of accounts of workplace violence there exists a particular sense of certainty; a certain confidence in what violence “really” is. With these accounts, philosophy appears unnecessary – and even luxurious – in the face of the obvious and bloody reality of workplace violence. [...] one outcome is an absence of a sense of curiosity about the concept of violence in many typical commentaries on workplace violence. Through a turn to philosophy it is suggested, we might possibly enquire into other senses of violence that may otherwise be erased. However, weary of simply “adding” philosophy, this paper also begins to sketch out some possible consequences a philosophy-violence connection might have for doing things with philosophy and organisation.

Workplace violence is only a marginal aspect of the widespread violence all over the world but I agree with Catley that philosophers usually do not consider this theme; he says they lack a “curiosity” about violence: this book aims at further filling this gap.

Similarly, in an interesting book about the relationships between phenomenology and violence, which mainly addresses the problem of war, Dodd (2009, p. 2) says:

It might strike one as a strange point of departure for a reflection on the obscurity of violence to raise the question of its properly philosophical character. Does not virtually any obscurity, not to mention profound questions of human existence, by definition invite philosophical reflection? This already begs the question. For perhaps it is instead the case that the problems of violence are not, in the end, all that obscure, even if they may be difficult to understand.

Furthermore, the existence of a conviction about a kind of stupidity of violence is illustrated:

In its barest form, the stupidity of violence principle states that violence is and can be only a mere means. As a mere means, pure violence remains trapped, according to the principle, within the confines of a very narrow dimension of reality defined by the application of means. Violence as such is thus blind; when taken for itself it is ultimately without

direction. The practices of violence, however traumatic and extreme, fade into indefinite superficialities unless supported by a meaningful cause or end. To be sure, the stupidity of violence does not detract from the seriousness of the consequences of violence, the damage it inflicts – the shredded flesh, the famine and disease, the pain both physical and spiritual, and the shocking number of corpses that it leaves in its wake. [...] violence is stupid, in that it involves nothing more significant than what can be captured and organized in a technical fashion. [...] Likewise, the morality of war does not find, according to this principle, any chance of being expressed, so long as we only follow along the passage of the event of violence that has been so tightly reduced to this line of cause to effect (Dodd, 2009, pp. 11–12).¹

The lack of curiosity is accompanied by a sense of certainty about “what violence is”, Catley says, and I agree with him. There is a sense of certainty that suppresses its historical variability² and that only leaves a hypocritical sense of it as a merely deplorable outbreak on an otherwise peaceful scene. “Philosophy, it would seem, appears unnecessary – and even luxurious – in the face of the obvious and bloody reality of workplace violence” (ibid.)

In sum, we do not only need philosophers of science or moral philosophers but also “philosophers of violence”. I also strongly believe that the problem of violence is no less important than the problem of morality and I plan to show how the two are strictly intertwined.³

1.1.1 Individual and Structural Violence

A kind of common prejudice is the one that tends to assign the attribute “violent” only to physical and possibly bloody acts – homicides, for example – or physical injuries; but linguistic, structural, and other various aspects of violence also have to be taken into account. However, even homicide itself is more complicated than expected, in fact research on the legal framework of homicide and on its biological roots shows many puzzling aspects. Brookman (2005) contends that it is not appropriate to think of homicide just as a kind of criminal or violent behavior, because the phenomenon is complex and socially constructed for the most part. Those who kill do so for very different reasons and under different circumstances, and some structurally originated

¹ Various classical philosophers concerned with the meaning of war and violence are usefully analyzed in the book: Arendt (multidimensional and subjective character of violence); von Clausewitz and Schmitt (political instrumentality of violence and “constitutive” violence); Heidegger, Sartre, Nietzsche, and Jünger (non-instrumentality and nihilism of violence); Patočka (violence and responsibility).

² Cf. also (Keane, 1996).

³ However, a new focus of attention on violence in philosophy seems to be “in the air”. Very recently McCumber (2011), in “Philosophy after 9/11”, has stressed the need to reshape research in philosophy (and its related community) from various perspectives, for example defending Enlightenment, beyond the mere use of the “[...] standard arsenal of argument forms, of which our Analytical colleagues make excellent though wrongly exclusive use” (p. 28). The paper is part of a collection with the eloquent title *Philosophy and the Return of Violence* (Eckstrand and Yates, 2011).

killing is often hidden and disregarded, even from the legal point of view, such as in the case of multiple homicides perpetrated by corporations. He illustrates various explanations of homicide: psychoanalytic and clinical approaches, accounts from evolutionary psychology or social and cognitive psychology frameworks, sociological and legal aspects and the biological roots of killing.⁴

The extension of the meaning of the word violence brings up the need to reconsider our concepts of safety, ethics, morality, law and justice. Maybe the philosophy-violence connection (with the help of other related disciplines, both scientific and cognitive) will generate novel ideas and suggestions. Of course people and intellectuals are clearly aware that drug, alcohol, revenge, frustration, and mobbing behaviors are related to violent events, and so many aspects of linguistic and structural violence are acknowledged, but this acknowledgment is almost always fugitive and superficial. In sum, we see the spectacle of violence everywhere, but, so to say, the violence always out there, involves *other* human beings and we can stay distant from the theme of violence by adopting a simple and familiar – but practically empty – view of it. Indeed, it is implicit that, if we know for certain that we are the possible target of violent behavior, we *a priori* think of ourselves, spontaneously, as exempt from any contamination, in our supposed purity and immunity. We just hope not to become victims, but this is usually considered just a question of good luck, and, above all, we are not interested (even if we are, or think of ourselves as, philosophers) in analyzing the possible existence and character of *our* own (more or less) violent behavior. It is better not “to problematise our confidence in, or familiarity with, ‘what violence is’” (Catley, 2003).⁵

Familiarity with violence involves a trivial and simple *sense* of violence as interpersonal, physical, and illegitimate, which can be clearly seen in the case of workplace violence as a:

[...] deviant set of behaviours to be eradicated through a series of familiar strategic interventions. Workplace violence becomes reduced to a technically rational set of “procedural issues about workforce selection, early detection of potential troublemakers, adequacy of liability insurance, risk management and effective exclusion of potential as well as actual offenders” [...]. And it is this familiarity that erases questions about the constitution of violence that might lead us to ask other critical questions about the organisation of work and the work organisation beyond individual pathography. Arguably, the familiarity of violence as interpersonal and illegitimate has encouraged explanations of workplace violence to focus on the individual and the eradication of such deplorable behaviour. In these explanations, the focal point has tended around the exposition of the personality and motivations of the “perpetrator”, typically with a view to profiling the violent individual (Catley, 2003, p. 4).

The passage is clear and eloquent. Violence tends to become an easy matter for psychologists, sociologists, etc., who make – sometimes vane – efforts to depict the structural aspects of situations and institutions and how they change (families, markets, nations, prisons, workplaces, races, genders, classes, and so on). However,

⁴ On the psychological explanations of mothers killing their children see (McKee, 2006).

⁵ Further details about the concept of structural violence, the problem of its possible legitimization, and the relationship between violence and justice in the case of “just war” are illustrated in (Coady, 2008, chapters two and three).

what really matters is to describe how individuals respond in a dysfunctional way because of their personality, motivation, and (lack of) rationality. The full violent potential of structures, artifacts, institutions, cultures, and ideologies is marginalized and disregarded. For example we rarely acknowledge the fact that contemporary humans can – with scarce awareness – damage the future as well as the present causing future populations to be our “unborn victims”, thanks to the consumption of energy, the pollution of air and water, or the demolition of cultural traditions. It is only the “abnormal” individual that is seen as prone to suddenly perpetrating violence, and only (right wing?) repressive policies that are considered extinguishers of the violent anomaly.

To summarize: it is the individual that is violent, but the inherent violence of structures (where for example injustice and relations of dominations are common, and violent attitudes are constantly distributed and promoted) is dissimulated or seen as a “good” violence, in the sense that it is ineluctable, obvious, and thus, acceptable. Every day in Italy at least three workers die in their workplace, and this seems natural and ineluctable. The potential harmfulness of organizational practices and workplace management leads to violent events and are rarely seen as causing them. When they are seen as violence-promoters, this consideration is a kind of “external” description which exhausts itself thanks to a huge quantity of hypocritical rhetoric and celebration. Again, we tend to focus on the familiar idea of violence as basically physical and we ignore or belittle other aspects of violence which neither leave their mark on the body nor relate back to it.

In his book Žižek (2009) reveals “the hypocrisy of those who, while combating *subjective violence*, commit *systemic violence* that generates the very phenomena they abhor” (p. 174). Language and media in modern life continually show a spectacle of brutality accompanied by a kind of urgent (but “empty”) “SOS violence”, which de facto systematically serves to mask and to obliterate the symbolic (embedded in language, as I will amply illustrate in the second part of this chapter and in the following one) and structural-systemic violence like that of capitalism, racism, patriarchy, etc. Žižek provides the following, amazing example of the intertwining between charity and social reproduction of globalized capitalism: “Just this kind of pseudo urgency was exploited by Starbucks a couple of year ago when, at store entrances, posters greeting customers pointed out that almost half of the chain’s profits went into health-care for the children of Guatemala, the source of their coffee, the inference being that with every cup you drink, you save a child’s life” (p. 5). The instantiation of this hypocrisy is clear when analyzing the philanthropic attitude of what Žižek calls the *democratic liberal communist capitalists*, who absolve themselves as systemic violent monopolizers and ruthless pursuers of profit thanks to an individual policy of charity and of social and humanitarian responsibility and transcendental gratitude. Žižek also warns us that a cold analysis of violence typical of the media and human sciences somehow reproduces and participates in its horror; also empathising with the victims, the “overpowering horror of violent acts [...] inexorably functions as a lure which prevents us from thinking” (p. 3).

Another aspect of structural violence can be traced back from the analysis of the commodification of sexuality in our rich capitalist societies. The urgency of sex tends to violate the possibility of love and the encounter with the Other:

Houellebecq (2006) depicts the morning-after of the Sexual Revolution, the sterility of a universe dominated by a superego injunction to enjoy [...] sex is an absolute necessity [...] so love cannot flourish without sex; simultaneously, however, love is impossible precisely because of sex: sex, which “proliferates as the epitome of late capitalism’s dominance, has permanently stained human relationships as inevitable reproductions of the dehumanizing nature of liberal society; it has essentially ruined love”. Sex is thus, to put it in Derridean terms, simultaneously the condition of the possibility and of the impossibility of love (p. 9).

To make another example, harassing, bullying, and mobbing are typical violent behaviors that usually involve only language instead of direct physical injury: that is, blood is not usually shed. Bullying can also be ascribed to such a category, but in a somewhat minor dimension since bullies often resort to both physical and linguistic threats. Of course, the sophisticated intellectual and philosopher – but not the average more or less cultured person – says “certainly, mobbing involves violence!”, but this violence is *de facto* considered secondary, at most it is only worth considering as “real” violence when it is in support of actual events of physical violence. It is well-known that people tend to tell themselves that the mobbing acts they perform are just the same as cases of innocuous gossiping, implementing a process of dissimulation and self-deception.

1.1.2 *Psychiatrization and Dehistoricization of Violence*

A strategy that aims at weakening serious attention to violence is often exploited by the media (and is common in everyday people). The mass media very often label episodes of violence, for example terrorism, as something pathological: “the terrorists kill for the sheer pleasure of killing and dying, the joy of sadism and suicide”, “they constitute a pathological mass movement”. Following Wieviorka (2009, p. 77) we can say that these considerations only serve to obscure any hidden causes for the “horrifying attacks” and represent a form of medicalization or *psychiatrization* of a behavior that comes to be dismissed as simply insane.⁶

Another strategy that aims at playing down the problem of violence consists in labeling some violent episodes as “new”, in a kind of “ahistorical individual pathology” where organizations and collectives are considered simply “affected” by violence, and certainly not part of it. Here is an eloquent example: “To represent workplace violence as a ‘new’ event serves to deny and evacuate any historical relationship between violence and work. This is not to suggest that the ‘object’ of workplace violence has remained constant throughout time, but to inoculate against any imagined sense that violence has not been present in the organisation of work” (Catley, 2003, p. 6). We know that this last statement is patently false just like in

⁶ On the relationships between psychiatry and violence cf. below, chapter five, section 5.2.

the case of bullying in schools – often marked as “new”. Catley nicely concludes: “Consequently, the result of accounts of workplace violence that distance themselves from viewing workplace violence as historical and sociological in favor of an ahistorical individual pathology is a continuance of the representation of the organization as being *affected* by violence rather than possibly *contributing* to, constructing or reproducing violence” (ibid.)⁷

A meaningful analysis of the so-called “deadly consensus”, which is at the basis of UK workplace safety is provided by Tombs and White (2009). The authors document the regulatory degradation as a result of its compatibility with neoliberal economic strategy. The degradation is justified by political and economical reasons, which rapidly become the *moral* grounds at the level of the individuals’ legitimacy in disregarding safety. A subsequent analysis of empirical trends within safety enforcement reveals a virtual collapse of formal enforcement, as political and resource pressures have taken their toll on the regulatory authority. Furthermore, an increasing impunity with which employers can actually kill and injure (even if they do not *mean* to, as the end of their action) is also observed.

1.1.3 *Victims and Media*

In sum, we can say that in a common sense (as it emerges, for instance, in the mass media) the representation of violence is really partial and rudimental. In our current technological globalized world media and violence live in a kind of symbiosis (Wieviorka, 2009, p. 68) – just think about terrorism – this presents two aspects: the first is that victims are continuously exhibited and described, and this is positive, because they are not simply disregarded as collateral, like in the past, but are increasingly represented in the violence that they have suffered and which has damaged their moral and/or physical integrity. One can at least think “that the thesis that violence is functional loses its validity” (p. 160) since an effective depiction of violence halts the belief that violence has a (more or less) just reason and a reasonable scope. The second aspect is concerned with what the victims are like, so to speak, the “words” the journalists depict them with, and the fact that the subjective side of the victims is rarely presented, favoring empathy and the sense of the audience’s psychological incorporation of the actuality of violence.⁸ Thus a culture of fear is favored but, at the same time, violence may be unintentionally promoted and reinforced.

⁷ Amazingly, empirical research showed that in Australia around 26% of workplace bullying can be attributed to the 1% of the employee population, representing “corporate psychopaths”. Corporate psychopaths, like toxic leaders, cause major harm to the welfare of others, trigger organizational chaos, and are a major obstacle to efficiency and productivity (Boddy et al., 2010; Boddy, 2010).

⁸ On the need to construct, in “existentialist” critical criminology, a new concept of “event”, as a guiding image able to offer an alternative approach to victimization, trauma, and identity cf. the interesting (Spencer, 2011, p. 49): “Trauma resulting from events of victimization can transmogrify singularities both in terms of their bodies and possibilities. Each singularity experiences selfhood in discrete ways and their histories are not reducible to selfsameness. This refusal of selfsameness

In intellectual settings, with the exception of literature and arts, and of other – so to say – more or less “technical” disciplines (theory of law, religious studies, some branches of psychology, sociology, psychoanalysis, paleoanthropology, evolutionary psychology, evolutionary biology, and criminology), the lack of curiosity for violence is widespread and violence is basically *undertheorized*. In the case of “technical” disciplines an interest in violence is relatively recent. As interestingly noted by Gusterson (2007), when – starting from the 1980s – “new wars” and local processes of militarization with high civilian casualty rates came about in Africa, Central America, the former Eastern block, and in South Asia, anthropologists showed a greater interest in various kinds of violence: a kind of “cultural turn”, Gusterson says. They started to analyze terror, torture, death squads, ethnic cleansing, guerilla movements, fear as a way of life, permanent war economy, the problem of military people as “supercitizens”, war tourism, the memory work⁹ inherent in making war and peace, and also the problem of nuclear weapons and American militarism. They also stressed the role of current military apologetics in the USA, which favored and still favors degraded popular culture saturated with racial stereotypes, aestheticized destruction, and images of violent hyper-masculinity. In this perspective of a new widespread militarism (as a source of so much suffering in the world) it can be said that the “war on terror” has provided the occasion for a new intellectual commitment to the theme of violence debating the merits of military anthropology versus critical ethnography of the military. However, we have to say that all too often, especially in psychology and sociology, the analysis of violent behavior is exhausted by the description of the more or less vague characters of various psychopathological individuals or groups, where empirical data and practical needs are the central aim, but deeper structural and theoretical aspects are disregarded, while they could be crucial to a fuller understanding and subsequently to hypothesize long-term solutions.

1.1.4 *Philosophy and Violence*

I strongly agree with Catley that philosophy can become a “catalyst” for “energizing” our thinking about the multifaceted aspects of violence. However, we have to remember that of course “philosophy in the forms of its philosophical institutions and practices may too exert its own forms of violence. Rather than standing in opposition to violence, philosophy may well reproduce that which it seeks to condemn. The faithful love of ideas harbors an affair with violence” (Catley, 2003, pp. 11–12). It is obvious that philosophy can afford to explore the problem of violence only if choosing a side to stand on; philosophy has to be aware that, given the inherent violent nature of knowledge and language I will soon illustrate in this book, it is not immune to it, and that every option chosen has the chance of producing violent

moves victimology beyond the assertion of ‘the victim’ of a type of crime, to the plurality of experiences connected to manifold events of victimization and their attendant effects”.

⁹ A collective mobilization of memory about past injuries.

effects. For example “Here one might think of the institutionalization of philosophy, where what is included and excluded in the canon is decided. Or the silencing effects of truth, where ‘truth’ is mobilized to close down dissenting positions. Philosophy becomes complicit in the sorts of domination enacted when the arbitrary takes on the status of the natural to close down alternative ways of knowing, courses of action, and subject positions in order to preserve dominant relationships of power” (ibid.): to make an example, how can we forget that often the presentation of a sophisticated philosophical argument about “creation” is experienced and “perceived” as a tremendous violence by some religious and/or uncultured people?

As I have already said in the preface to this book, philosophy has always displayed a tendency to “dishonor violence” by disregarding it. Step by step the philosophical intellectual commitment to violence has become more and more objective and abstract and is being transformed into an autonomous subject of philosophical reflection. Now we can say that philosophy has learnt to *respect* violence and – so to speak – its “moral dignity” as a philosophical topic.

An initial theoretical step in this book is to acknowledge that, often, structural violence is seen as *morally* legitimate: we have to immediately note that when parents, policemen, teachers, and other agents inflict physical or invisible violence on the basis of *legal* and/or *moral reasons*, these reasons do not cancel the violence perpetrated and violence does not have to be condoned. In chapter three¹⁰ of this book I will describe how a kind of common psychological mechanism called “embubblement” is at the basis of rendering violence invisible and condoning it. Human beings are prisoners of what I call *moral bubbles*, which systematically disguise their violence to themselves: this concept is also of help in analyzing and explaining why so many kinds of violence in our world today are treated as if they were something else. Such a structural violence, which is in various ways legitimated, leads to the central core of my commitment to the analysis of various relationships between morality and violence.

It seems to me there is an increasing interest in the intertwining between morality and violence in concrete research concerning human behavior. For example Smith Holt and colleagues (2009, p. 4) contend that there is a common thread that emerges in various relatively recent studies about killing: “[...] something about moral code, a religious or ethical belief enmeshed within a cultural context, determines one’s stance on various types of killing and, indeed, on inhibitors to killing”.

A philosopher I found to explicitly (seemingly, at least) acknowledge the strict link between morality and violence is Allan Bäck. He first of all contends that aggression is not necessarily a destructive or morally bad act:

In contrast to aggression, I shall thus take “violence” in the basic sense to signify a certain sort of aggression, namely an aggressive activity to which judgments, of being good or bad, apply. In many moral and legal theories, such judgments require, among other things, considering the conscious of the moral agent(s). According to such views, if you are aware of what you are doing, will to do so, and could do otherwise, you are morally responsible for those acts. You might, then, be able to do something without being morally responsible,

¹⁰ Cf. subsection 3.2.2.

if you did not will the act, or were not aware of what you are doing, or were in a mental state of extreme duress of emotion. At any rate, I shall suppose that normal cases of human intentional action are subject to moral judgment and are chosen (Bäck, 2009, p. 369).

From the perspective of the perpetrator an action is violent when it is aggressive, it is “chosen” and when the victim would not want to suffer that harm (i.e., “the action unjustly violates the rights of the victim, where ‘rights’ signifies the morally ideal set of entitlements that the recipient of the action – typically a person – ought to have”). In such a way violence “contains” a moral component that “is associated with choosing to engage in actions that harm another person and attempting to force that person to act as you want”. In this basic sense

1. violence – from the perspective of the perpetrator – is the fruit of moral deliberation (always endowed with its “idealistic” and “pure” halo),¹¹ but
2. usually, when we judge a human act to be violent we mean something *pejorative*, we need to add the condition that the selected choice is morally wrong, the agent ought not have made that choice. It is clear that this judgment of violence is of second order and derives from a moral judgment that usually does not belong to the perpetrator; indeed I strongly think the case of a perpetrator that consciously performs violence, by disobeying to *his own* moral conviction, is a rare case of a real mephistophelian behavior. It is clear that the second meaning of violence tends to *obliterate* the first one: we always forget that violent actions are usually performed on the basis of moral deliberations.

Taking advantage of some philosophical and interdisciplinary considerations, my aim is to attribute more sense to violence: I will link violence to a number of issues including ethical, juridical, cognitive, and anthropological ones. The following are the three first steps: 1) a definition of violence is required; 2) we need to emphasize how we can shed light on morality and violence through the so-called *coalition enforcement* hypothesis; 3) we have to deepen our knowledge about the moral and – at the same time – violent nature of language (for example, but not only, in the case of speech acts). I will consider these issues in the following sections illustrating the useful concept of *military intelligence*. To anticipate the content taking advantage of a kind of motto, I can say: “when words distribute moral norms and habits, often they also wound and inflict harm”.

1.2 Defining Violence: Violence Is Distributed and Always “Perceived” as Such

People, and especially analytic moral philosophers, usually ask for definitions. We can try to offer a definition of violence. Disregarding here the well-known definition of evil as a supernatural phenomenon, which is interesting from other cultural

¹¹ (Baumeister, 1997).

perspectives, we have to face its nature in terms of human and interpersonal relationships. First of all I can say that violence is always perceived as such directly by an individual (who eventually derives that way of perceiving from the shared culture of the group(s) to which he belongs): “The same act can count as violent or non-violent, depending on its context; sometimes, a polite smile can be more violent than a brutal outburst” (Žižek, 2009, p. 180). Furthermore, Taylor (2009) has emphasized the need – from an evolutionary perspective – to involve morality, at least as far as the definition of violence is concerned. She suggests that cruelty is a concept that has meaning only in the context of morality, and morality is an evolved property possessed only by humans (and rudimentarily by our closest evolutionary neighbors, as contended by many evolutionists and animal-cognition researchers). She contends that what is perceived as cruel is dependent on context and culture. Why, for instance, is targeted assassination by dropping a one-ton bomb from a plane on to the house of an alleged enemy not cruel, whereas a suicide bomber who immolates himself together with his victims is cruel?¹²

I have contended in the previous section that aggression in itself is not necessarily violent: a surgeon that causes pain to a patient by ordering chemotherapy is not violent in the “pejorative” sense of the term (and indeed that aggression is not perceived by the recipient himself in a morally pejorative sense). The mechanism of attribution of violence to an act, a situation, an event varies between cultures and approaches, and the judgments can be more emotional and less conceptual or vice versa.¹³ Of course there are aspects of violence (like in the case of death from a bloody aggression, or in the case of incest) that are almost universally shared across cultures; even if we have to remember that, for example, those who commit suicide do not perceive killing themselves as an actually violent act, to them their tragic death is often considered a relief. Moreover, killing oneself or killing others is often morally justified thanks to political or religious reasons both by the suicide/killer and by his group.¹⁴

¹² A full analysis of the concept of cruelty is given by Randolph Mayes (2009). The author defies the idea that cruelty is widely regarded to be a uniquely human trait, which follows from the received definition of cruelty as involving the intentional infliction of suffering together with the empirical claim that humans are unique in their ability to attribute suffering (or any mental state) to other creatures. It is argued that the intuitive appeal of this definition “[...] stems from our abhorrence of cruelty, and our corresponding desire to define cruelty in such a way that it is almost always morally wrong. Scientifically speaking this is an arbitrary condition that inhibits our attempt to study cruelty as a natural phenomenon. I propose a fully naturalized definition of cruelty, one that considerably expands the range of creatures and behaviors that may be conceived as cruel” (p. 21).

¹³ Cognitive researchers have provided empirical evidence pointing to the fact that to metaphorically define or frame the issue of crime using the image of a predator yields systematically different suggestions with respect to those produced when crime is described as a virus, cf. (Thibodeau et al., 2009).

¹⁴ An analysis of various aspects of suicide is given by Joiner (2007): he finds three factors that mark those most at risk of death: thwarted belongingness, morally perceived burdensomeness, and the ability for self-harm. More data and analyses about violent aggression are given in (Gannon et al., 2007). The chapter by Palmer (2007) clearly teaches how moral reasoning often contributes to aggressive violent behavior, through its interaction with a range of other social cognitive processes: the author acknowledges that moral reasoning and other social cognitive variables act as a mediating factor between socialisation experiences (particularly early parenting styles) and aggressive

1.2.1 Decent Violent People

Another important issue is related to the fact that human beings experience a pervasive difficulty in understanding perpetrators of evil. It is well-known that Hannah Arendt famously noted that the fact that normal, banal, decent people could commit violent and more or less atrocious acts, seems

[...] to go against one’s basic understanding of the world. Some exceptional explanation must be required, because it seems that evil deeds should be done by evil people, and yet many such deeds are committed by people who do not conform to the stereotypes of evil. Yet these stereotypes are one of the major obstacles to understanding evil. This is ironic, because the myth of pure evil was constructed to help us understand evil – but it ends up hampering that understanding. The myth is a victim’s myth, and there is often a wide, almost impassable gap between the viewpoints of victims and perpetrators (Baumeister, 1997, p. 379).

Furthermore, thanks to the scientific research of the last few decades it is now clear that aggression, far from being an obvious exclusive instinctual endowment of human and non human animals, is mostly “learned” and specific to particular situations. Culture plays a great role, like the carnage of the last century clearly demonstrates, paradoxically showing that an increase of civilization has also increased some forms of violence.

Evil requires deliberate actions of one or more persons (or the unintentional intrinsic action mediated by an artifactual social structure), the suffering of another person, and the perception or judgment of either the second person or an observer.¹⁵ Basically, it is the moral “perception”¹⁶ human beings possess and activate which delineates “what is violent” and the effect of “victimization”, but perceptions are variegated and likely to change. If I morally think incest is “bad”, I can perceive incest as a violent sexual act; if I think patriarchal life is good, I can label women that rebel as violent/bad; but if I am a woman that rebels against patriarchal mentality, and so who adopts and activates a different morality (for example “feminist”, or simply informed by the legal norms of Western societies), I am the one to perceive the patriarchal male behavior as violent/bad. To give another example, if I think that retaliation is morally good, I morally approve of the act of *killing the killer* by capital punishment. The patent violent aspects “we” – as people who do not agree with the death penalty –

behavior. The biological counterpart (genes, neurotransmitters, hormones, neurological impairment) of aggression – verbal, physical, sexual; with or without a weapon; impulsive or premeditated – is dealt with in (Nelson, 2006).

¹⁵ Not every evildoer is an evil person but there is empirical evidence that a very large proportion of us is inclined to perform evil actions: following the detailed study illustrated in (Russell, 2010), which critiques the dispositional account of evil personhood, *S* is an evil person if *S* is strongly disposed to perform evil actions when in conditions that favor *S*’s autonomy.

¹⁶ I am taking advantage of the word perception in the general sense of the term, as an equivalent of judgment, feeling, reaction and so on, for example the reaction can derive from more or less “educated” emotions, or from more or less rational judgments, still related to the individual’s hard-wired cognitive endowments and to his present plastic learned cognitive capacities, and of course from a mixture of both.

perceive in this action disappear insofar as we are individuals that morally endorse this kind of retributive revenge. What I will call the *moral bubble* is still operating:¹⁷ obviously the retaliators see the performed violence “phenomenologically”, as just a justified aggression, which is not morally considered a violence and so it can be disregarded as such. On the contrary, we have to repeat, the same action of killing the killer is usually seen as profoundly violent by people that do not “morally” favor the death penalty and retaliating by killing. In general the two groups conflict, and the conflict can in turn also become violent, as I will more clearly illustrate in the following section.

1.2.2 *Honor and Institutional Cultures*

Another example of conflicting moralities can be traced back from the distinction between “honor cultures” and “institutional cultures”.¹⁸ These cultures present various conflicting ideas for example about moral responsibility and desert and about punishment. Honor cultures favor revenge and thus pay more normative attention to the offended party, so that they stop – via some kind of retaliation – feeling outraged or resentful: such practices are aimed at preventing further abuse, disgrace, ostracism, decrease in status for both oneself and one’s family. Conversely, institutional cultures favor retributive behaviors and discourage retaliation against defectors, because of its significant costs and risks, and so normatively focus on the offender and his persecution (the offender has to be punished to deter him and others from cheating again).¹⁹

Both cultures incorporate moral behaviors that aim at enhancing cooperation, researchers contend that the honor cultures are typical of herding and frontier societies, but their characteristics “[...] may be present in inner city gang life, some tribal

¹⁷ Cf. chapter three, subsection 3.2.2, this book.

¹⁸ (Sommers, 2009). Lately, even psychologists and cognitive scientists interested in moral behavior (always reluctant to abandon the ethnocentric prerogative of “morality” according to the one imbedded in monotheistic religions or in modern civil mentality) acknowledge the fact that also honor and other cultures are characterized by *ethical* concerns. For example (Gigerenzer, 2010, (p. 545): “Terrorists, the Mafia, and crack-dealing gangs run on moral principles (e.g. (Gambetta, 1996)). [...] I suggest that the heuristics underlying moral behavior are not the mirror image of the Ten Commandments and their modern equivalents, but embody more general principles that coordinate human group”. Further insight on cultures of honor in southern United States, from an evolutionary psychological perspective, is provided by (Shackelford, 2005).

¹⁹ It is worth noting that honor cultures – the mafia can be considered a fitting example – contrarily to law-enforcement cultures, do not pay attention to the “[...] whole concept of responsibility and, in particular, the ‘deservingness’ of the offender. [...] The important thing is that the injured party retaliates against someone, someone who bears a connection to the offender. Otherwise, honor is lost. Of course, [if, for instance, the offense is a murder] the most suitable target is the murderer (as long as he is of equal status to the victim). But there is no prohibition against punishing relatives or associates of the offender, since the primary function of retaliation is to restore the reputation of the offended party” (Sommers, 2009, p. 42).

societies, outlaw and mafia cultures, and other types of environments as well” (p. 39), while the institutional ones are typical of agricultural communities and, in general, they are incorporated in strategies intended to promote the fitness of large groups. In this last case – often characterized by centralized forms of law-enforcement – massively discouraging free-riding is crucial for the interests of the whole group, not just for particular individuals, as it is in the case of honor cultures. It is from this perspective that Boyd, Gintis, Bowles and Richerson (2003) call the punishment exerted in these cultures “altruistic”, which involves little sacrifice on the part of the punishers. In conclusion, honor cultures privilege the morality of retaliation while institutional cultures stress moral responsibility and desert.

Looking at honor cultures through the morality we are accustomed to (that is, as twenty-first century, Western human beings, citizens of well-established democracies), or through the abstract concepts of moral philosophy compels us to miss their intrinsically *moral* aspects. Of course I agree with Sommers, some honor killings are not perpetrated by moral monsters, like in the following case:

This is when a family member murders a woman or girl because she has lost her virginity, which is seen as a stain on the family’s honor. What makes these cases even more unfathomable is that often the murdered woman is a victim of rape. Most groups in Western cultures find this perspective not just appalling but utterly bewildering. Even if one believes that pre-marital sex is a mortal crime, how can anyone think it is appropriate to punish victims of rape? It is clearly not the rape victim’s fault that she committed this “crime” and lost her virginity. The phenomenon becomes a little easier to understand if we imagine that the cultures that support this behavior do not have a strong notion of desert to begin with. If that is the case, it is almost irrelevant that the victims do not in any way deserve their fate. Note that in many cases, the family members are not moral monsters; they are often consumed with grief at the death of a beloved daughter or sister. But they will seldom repent the act. We might imagine that family members regard victims of rape as a fatal illness. That is why tremendous grief is consistent with a complete lack of repentance for the killings. The injustice of these deaths does not resonate to members of honor cultures nearly as much as it does to those of us in institutionalized cultures (Sommers, 2009, pp. 42–43).

Moreover, it is important to stress the fact that people certainly share common objective moralities and systems of values (collective “axiologies”, as I will describe in chapter four), that are widespread and dominant in their group/groups, but also possess individual moralities that they use on occasion, often related to subcultures that endorse violence. Baumeister (1997) usefully notes that various subcultures – more or less widespread and implicitly carried by mass media and moralistic gossip – of the supposed morality of the *irresistible impulse* constitute a subcultural morality that favors and justifies much violence.²⁰ An example: I can adopt in certain circumstances a modern morality, inspired by legal/civil norms, that does not contemplate mobbing, but at the same time I can adopt – more often without any awareness – in some other circumstances, ancestral different moralities,²¹ like the scapegoat mechanism, and I can become a mobber, implicitly believing (contrarily to my legal/civil

²⁰ Cf. chapter five, section 5.1, this book.

²¹ We can call them *protomoralities*, if we frame them in the light of modern, civil or post-biblical moral tradition.