

# A philosophical thought about violence and bioethics

## Una reflexión filosófica sobre la violencia y la bioética

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### Summary

The article shows a philosophical approach to the concept of violence. In order to achieve this, various meanings or uses of the term violence are analyzed. In the Introduction, a preliminary version of violence is analyzed. In the second section, violence is discussed as a personal rupture. In the third section, a pair of arguments using the term violence are analyzed and thus, withdraw its definition. We close it with the conclusions.

*Key words:* person, anthropology, will, willingness, will power.

### 1. Introduction

Nicola Abbagnano, in his Dictionary of Philosophy, defines violence as “an action contrary to the Moral, Judicial or Political Order”.<sup>1</sup> Never the less that definition seems to excessively limit what we understand by violence. It is in logical terms, a too restricted definition.

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How to characterize it then? Violence is an equilibrium rupture. Thus, the concept can be extended or enhanced analogically, to different areas of reality. We may speak about violence in Nature, when the equilibrium which allows stability or the development of an entity is broken. This way, the fire that destroys a forest is violent in that sense. Thus we can say that an animal exerts violence on another one, when it takes it to the limit of its own existence.

But, isn't this a case of an improper extrapolation from the concept of what is human, to what it is not? Isn't it therefore, an opposite meaning to Abbagnano's definition, namely a too extended definition? Yet wisely, Heraclitus in his time, claimed about the human condition which debates on or around limits: "For the Divinity all things are beautiful, good, and fair. On the contrary, for men, some things are fair and other unfair".<sup>2</sup>

However, I think that the concept of violence implies a certain theology, which we cannot evade. Violence is evidenced as that rupture of the aim or purpose. As it is understood this way, the use both of the non-human natural world as well as the human world, make sense. Never the less, defending such stand, has the difficulties inherent to finalism or teleology: Do we really have a natural order in the human world that, by breaking it, we have committed violence?

If we reduce violence only to the judicial point of view, we can only say that it depends on the current legislation what we can say about violence. But it is clear at least in discussions about violence, that only the legal or judicial side of it, does not suffice. I can exert violence, even within legality or when using it. Thus, a judge can sentence a person to the death penalty, with accumulated evidence, for the purpose of revenge or humiliation, remaining this way within the legal field. This said in other terms, legality only by itself, does not prevent violence, and peace as a counterpart of violence, cannot stand, supported only by rules and regulations. Peace, understood as nonviolence, is more than the human rational order.

## 2. Violence as a meaningless cone

Maybe another way to show the meaning of violence, is as a rupture of meaning, or of sense. In a strict manner then, there isn't any kind of violence with meaning, but simply any act of violence is meaningless, as far as it breaks order and the purpose of the world and of people:

Violence is ubiquitous and polysemic. It is simultaneously conditioned by biologic, psychologic, social, cultural symbolic, political, ethical and historical factors. Violence is also phenomenologically reluctant, because, even though it is always aimed to an object or a subject, it is not an objective one. Violence destroys; it stops something or to somebody, but it cannot be destroyed.<sup>3</sup>

If people are the absolute of the world, where by losing each one of them, a part of the world itself is also lost, violence would be against people,<sup>4</sup> it would be a removal of a part of the sense or meaning of the world. In this regard, death is indeed a type of violence as far as the loose of sense. In the face of death, the world is violated as far as its purpose. Of course, again, I suppose we have here a teleological stand: the world possesses a purpose. However, we have to add that the laws of sense or meaning due to the elimination or the damage to people, surpasses the teleologism. People are a life project. Life projects are unique, thus any life project, regardless of how limited it should seem to us, is unrepeatable. Let it be noted that I specifically point out, "unrepeatable".

Life projects are "copiable" but their personal realization surpasses any copy. This way, two persons can study medicine, of the same age, at the same place, wanting "the same", but in reality we are before different unfolding, due to their own nucleus of each one of them. Every decision is really unique, because it is given in different subjects, different persons, with life stories and context always unique.

Well then, violence under this enhanced notion in a person, could be described as “the rupture of a personal project”. The advantage of a definition or approach of this type is, that it allows to understand, that violence is more than the rupture of a predestinated natural order, but it is the truncation of personal development possibilities. Thus violence, appears in environments where the strictly moral issues have been accomplished, or let’s say the letter of the law, but a person’s project has been disrupted.

Usually it is common to associate violence with aggressiveness, but the same...

...it is an instinctive conduct, the result of a natural mechanism which triggers before certain stimuli, and it withdraws or ceases before others. At the same time, in the deepest part of this reactive conduct, there is a basic emotion: fear... Well then, violence is not sheer aggressiveness itself. Violence is not a re-action, but an action or an in-action. It is the resulting conduct of converting the unaware reaction, in which aggressiveness consists of conscious actions (or inactions): it is the action (or the inaction) made on purpose, which causes or may cause damage.<sup>5</sup>

Violence, as well can be categorized in several ways as structural, or cultural, of gender, among others.<sup>6</sup> However, here I want to focus on a metaphysical category. This category is the personal status of the human beings.

People are that, persons, for their capability to subjectively interact. We not only contact each other, but we interrelate with each other.<sup>7</sup> The discovery of the other’s subjectivity, and see ourselves reflected in the same, causes admiration and acknowledgement. The highest jeopardy of a fragmented society, is to see others as competitors, as others that they are there to look for the same scarce resources. This fragmentation is the genesis of violence. Or better said, that is already violence. Why? If the person is called to a communion with others, the idea of the competition against the others, is the denial itself, of that communion.

Communion is an affective rational link. Intelligence discovers the wellbeing of the other, the will admires the same, and the intelligence discovers the value of sharing or better said, of his search which is given on the road to sharing it, and the will looks for the means to stay in that state. We approve the means that we discover. The most proper means is examined, and a means is selected instead of another one. Here, as pointed out by the traditional doctrine,<sup>8</sup> is where freedom is given, the election of that concrete means. This means cannot constitute in other persons, for this would destroy their own search of that good. It is the election of “state of matters” which allow the true relationship with the others. These conditions are ethical and constitute in their climax the purpose of politics. Even in the economic relations, the supremacy of a relationship not of denomination but of cooperation.

The denomination itself, for example, in the economic field constitutes the Chrematistics;<sup>9</sup> to look for the money, for the money *per se*, for the power that involves, not over things, but over the others.

In the Bioethics field, an example can show what is meant: the transplants. To donate an organ, is just that, a donation, it is a delivery to another person, in order to create a state of matters, as we said, that is to say, the life conditions of the others. It should not be mediated by money or of another benefit, which would turn it into violent, or said in another way, competition. Public Policies, are that, to create human closeness in the community.

The above does not imply either, that we should always be certain of which are those conditions that promote closeness among people: there are true conflict of means to be used. Thus, for example, community interests could crash, as well as the cases of having to decide between a park and a new housing construction in that location.

In the political field, tries to decide the goods or conditions to facilitate human harmony, but sometimes no rational strategies have to be used, as chance, in order to be able to achieve them. For

example, the line in a bank, does not perform a distinction between the personal needs of those who are in the line. Attention has been decided in a good amount by chance.<sup>10</sup> In the case of transplants, organ designation strategies are combined; there is a random waiting list, which looks to qualify them by a subtle differentiation according to the seriousness and/or need of who requires the organ.<sup>11</sup>

The previous examples show why violence is strongly associated with the political and social order. Even though we can do “violence to ourselves” as we already have seen by considering ourselves as objects, the term is better understood in the use with others. Thus after this approach, we could characterize as violent something like the *use of power, in order to maintain power over what is ours and what is of somebody else*.

### **3. Thoughts considering arguments around the nature of violence**

Another way to approach the nature of violence is to propose arguments to defend some of its assumptions. Thus, for example, it could be said:

1. Every act against human nature is violence.  
And then comes the huge problem of delimiting “nature”  
What could be said? Its abstract and general character could suggest to us to understand human nature as the common things shared with everybody. Maybe then, it can be modified, to turn it into a more operational proposition:
2. Every act which prevents human development is violence.  
That premise does not generate too much controversy, even though many could, in general, agree with the same, but at the moment of taking it to more concrete areas, difficulties would arise. For example, if the following would be discussed:

- a) Every act which prevents human development is violence.
- b) Abortion prevents human development, therefore, it is violent.

Paradoxically, many people would say the opposite: to oppose to the performance of an abortion, is an act of obstetric violence, that is to say, that the human development of the mother and the fetus would be in conflict. With this example the difficulty to speak about “human development” is shown, because that concept is not an instantaneous one, so to speak. It is a complex concept that possesses elements related to the biological, but not constrained to it, for which it is difficult to clarify that cultural and natural framework which implies the same. Thus, for example, somebody who lives in extreme poverty, blocks in general, his capability of humanly developing. But it is not as clear, in what aspect yes, and what not, more than in the extreme situations. Even though the example could seemed to be outrageous, it is not. People, as religious persons of different denominations, which waive richness and that live in poverty, even their “great spiritual life” causes admiration. Then, we can see the difficulty to establish what obstacles are violent, or even better what we categorize when we use the term.

Nevertheless, the examples of usage distinguish limits. The ascetic that lets himself to die, literally of hunger, usually asks himself if he has been mistaken in his behavior. Even the person which uses abortion as a systematic means of birth control, we think that in a way he attempts against his development, even though he defends his legalization. Stated in other terms, we see limits. Human development seems to be “something” related with limits, and thus it gives us the clue for the concept of violence. Violence, would now be in this second approach *to cross limits or to push limits within their own or foreign conduct, which harms human development.*

Let's move to another expression:

1. All act against our autonomous decisions is violence  
This expression, is common especially in Bioethics. Violence, therefore, appears as a restrain to freedom of election. Violence

arises, as well as an act against the decision. Violence is then more than irrational, it is of volitional character. That cancels the predominance of the will in its sphere of action. Thus in the political field, violence would be *to oppose to the constituted will, even though it is mistaken*. This is to say, that from this expression we can think about the nature of what is violent as a will limit. This definition or quasi definition of violence, takes us to a certain incompatibility among the teleological vision: violence understood as the rupture of the purpose, seems to crash with the mere voluntarism. If indeed everything is decided as an opposition to will, it seems that, in the first place, an arbitrary position to speak of limits for the purpose.

When it is spoken about violence versus the conscience, it is stated that it consists in the performance against it, even though it is mistaken. If to follow your own conscience it is the first principle of moral order, forbidding to follow your own conscience, it is violence. Nevertheless, to follow your conscience, is not an act of mere will, but an act of decision over the means we use, which we assess as the goods to get or the evil to avoid. Thus, to obey your own conscience is an act which assumes the performance of the reason and of its assessment as proper to the concrete decision. It is clear that, recalling the traditional ethics, the conscience is assumed to be informed, which is, rationally checked with everything provided, the experience, the advice to others, etc., which would allow them this way to help in the decision.<sup>11</sup>

The above aims to the meaning that I will call restricted, of violence with himself: *It is only violent to against the informed will*, but not in any act of the will. Thus we could say, that there is one form of this: the will of power for the power itself towards us or towards the others which surpasses the area of what is rational becoming in real violence. The craving for power is a human feature where I want to impose mi vision of the world to myself and to others “at any price”, that is, where the rationality of the goods has disappeared.

In other words, there is an unbalanced predominance of the will what gives rise to violence. Strictly speaking, for example, there is no violence in the animal world, but we project a reading of the world where the will has dominated over the will of others. There exists force, but no power in this sense. In a strict manner, the lion is strong with respect to the gazelle, but not powerful. Stated in other terms, in the ethical and political areas is where violence arises. Here, by political, we understand an extension or even the climax of ethics, as stated by Aristotle:

Every city appears in our eyes as a community; and each community is constituted at its time in the vision of some good... If then, all the human communities aim at some good, it is clear that the greatest good among all of them, should be for the supreme community to straighten among the others and which includes all the rest of them; that said, this is the political community which we call city.<sup>12</sup>

In this sense, there is a correlation between the “individual” violence and the one of the political area. Violence occurs in both areas. Violence as an obstacle to our own good, always has consequences in the social group. As a result it is pointed out with some reason the importance of political violence or the importance of the reconstruction of the social knitting in order to diminish the institutionalized violence.

In my opinion, violence is constituted in the search for a good from my own independence, where the reality as a good, doesn't serve as a limit anymore, and for that disrupts somebody else's good.

Power does not have limits, in the understanding that in the need to fill in my “freedom”, it becomes endless. Whereas, in freedom the control over the world, implies the control over himself. This is the traditional notion of Politics as ethics. It is not about a desire more or less sentimental of good intentions, but the recognition that the order has interconnected levels.

Thus, violence is the rupture of that order which in the political area it is shown in a clear manner. In the Bioethics field something similar has been shown: we have the risk of confusing independence with freedom, or as it usually is stated autonomy with liberty. The autonomy as a power by itself, breaks that order. It is clear that there are situations of authentic doubt as we have stated, where one has to follow his own conscience. But freedom, in order not to become violent, is to continue in search for the own goods which the rationality is giving us guidelines. That rationality is shown in the political area: if I understand the patient's rights as mere autonomy, we have ended with freedom, because the autonomous decision is no longer limited by any law; and if that was the case, then it is perceived as violence where probably doesn't exist such thing. Thus, when the physician patient relationship is understood as in freedom, both are limited by the goods they protect. The physician and the patient, then yes, decide and can refuse to certain actions, but admitting that their refusal is limited.

Legality is crucial, but that does not eliminate responsibility itself:

We are attending to the resignation of liberty in favor of legality. We think that legality per se is able to create nonviolent political, personal and peaceful communities. But we are wrong. That precisely is their illusion, their greatest perversion, and their lie: to make us believe that with that it is enough. Their greatest danger is to allow legality what it requires from liberty, of commitment, of the performance of the singularities in a world fundamentally constituted by differences.<sup>13</sup>

Stated in an argumentative form:

1. If we stop to recognize essential goods, then we leave everything to mere legality.
2. If we leave everything to mere legality, then we create violence surroundings. Consequently,

3. If we stop to recognize essential goods, then we create violence surroundings.

The first premise is proper of liberalism, at least in its extreme version. Freedom is understood in a negative way as the absence of constraint, or weaken interpret it as Engelhardt does with his principle of permission: it is legal to perform what the other one authorizes me.

The second premise summarizes what it has already stated in this article: the mere legality of formality or legalism ends, taken again to the extreme, to let individuals only to respond to a prizes and punishment scheme linked to power. It is not possible this way, that people would form open communities to everybody, not only subject to their interests.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Violence is a category that tries to summarize the breaking of the human order. Even though in an analogue manner it is common to enhance it to other areas, she is an improper analogy, because strictly speaking in the non-human natural world the facts occur. Nevertheless, violence in the human world shows up in the interpersonal relationships.

Violence is the breaking of the human order and of the conditions for personal possibilities. The possibility of development itself when it is truncated by somebody or structurally is not permitted, we speak about violence.

Violence, as all evil, is the denial of a good. It doesn't suffice for its repair only the legal order. The human good surpasses and fosters legality. People when together search for the good they support at the same time the legal order, but not all the way around. Bioethics is included in this dimension: seeking the wellbeing in order to create a just and legal order.

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- <sup>2</sup> Frag. 102. Taken from the *Pre-Socrates Philosophers. From Homer to Democritus*. SEP, México, 1987, p. 83.
- <sup>3</sup> CARRIZO DE REIMANN, A. The problem of meaning in violence. Contributions to the phenomenological-interpretative focus for the analysis of judicial sources. *Palimpsesto* Vol. x, N° 13 (January-June), 2018, p. 61.
- <sup>4</sup> A close definition to this one is: "Violence... that behavioral attitude which constitutes a violation or the deprivation to the human being of something which is essential to him as a person (physical, psychological or moral integrity, rights, freedom), it means that such violence is not only a form to do, but at the same time it is 'not allowing to do', that is, to deny possibilities of development as persons" (García González D. in search of a peace culture in front of violence: the case of people trafficking. *Frontera Norte*, 2014, Vol. 26, 51, p. 185).
- <sup>5</sup> SAN MARTÍN ESPLUGES, J. Keys to understand violence in the XXI century. *Ludus Vitalis*. vol. xx. num. 38/2012.
- <sup>6</sup> SEE GARCÍA GONZÁLEZ, D, *Op. cit.*, pp. 182-185.
- <sup>7</sup> To discover the other one, Vincent Martínez points out, shows our closeness and fragility which produces a dual feeling of fear and admiration: "In the interpretation in which we are working, there is an experience of admiration or wonder which makes us to discover the alterity of nature, and the intersubjective presence of other human beings. This discovery may produce fear. The Discovery of our belonging to the land, of our «terrestriality», could be a symptom of our fragility and therefore produces fear. The presence of the others, specially according to a feminist research for peace, of «the others» and of our relationship of dependence with them is also a symptom of our fragility and could produce, as well, fear" (Martínez Guzmán, V. 2015. Intersubjectivity, interculturality and politics from the Philosophy for Peace. *Thémata Revista de Filosofía*, N° 52, July-December, p. 149.
- <sup>8</sup> I follow here the characterization of the human act in twelve stages: some belong to the intelligence and others to the will. (See, Verneaux, R. *Filosofía del hombre*. Herder, Barcelona, 1985, pp. 152-154).
- <sup>9</sup> "... It seems to some people that the function of the domestic economy is to gather money, and they are always with the idea that their duty is either to treasure their capital or to increase it to infinity. The cause of this attitude is the quest to live, but not to live well, and as the desire of living does not have limits, consequently it is desired without a limit the things that stimulate life. Moreover, those who look for a good life, search the conducive to the pleasures of the body, and as this ones seem to depend on property, all their energy is applied to make money" (Aristotle, *Politics*, I, III, p. 167). As a difference of what is happening with the modern economic science, which has put all its interest in the assumed perfection of an abstract rational system, where there is no room for individual action, for what

was interesting to Aristotle, was the persons development, the continuous improvement of men's capability of action, which implies to help each other in the acquisition of virtues. In this sense, the true interchange between men, can only be performed under the influence of their best virtues and capabilities, which are the ones who make possible the interchange of things, the ones who make men happy. It is not understandable how each one pursuing to get the monopoly, can in the end arise a perfect competition situation, where nobody has more power than the rest on prices.

...The chrematistics is a technique, a non-exact or approximate knowledge, in continuous search and improvement, because it pursues a truth in performance, in a way that advancement and retreat have a place. That is why Aristotle insisted in that we must put all the attention in what is essential in the process of interchange, the only way to achieve and improvement. It cannot be limited to contribute to the calculation of some equilibrium prices, as the modern economical science pretends to do, but it has to be oriented to learn to interchange every time better. For that reason it keeps a natural or reasonable limit to that unavoidable tendency to money accumulation... Happiness is an activity, a way to act which it is aimed to a good life not to a distribution of things. Opposite to what is thought by the modern theoretical economists, the interchange is not a "natural fact", something objective and neutral but human actions whose perfection depends on the devises or virtues of the ones who perform them, which is is learnt doing and not thinking. (Martínez Echevarría Ortega, M. [2011] Technology and chrematistics in Aristotle. *Empresa y Humanismo Magazine*, Vol xiv / N° 2, pp. 84-85.)

<sup>10</sup> Although sometimes they make lines for disabled or elderly people.

<sup>11</sup> An example is The Proposal of the homologation of criteria in the procedure for the distribution and assignment of organs and for hepatic transplant of a deceased donor. (An Internet document) CENATRA, México. Taken from: [https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/264683/Propuesta\\_de\\_Homologacion\\_de\\_Criterios\\_THO.pdf](https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/264683/Propuesta_de_Homologacion_de_Criterios_THO.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> "Liberty is truly a freedom when it is committed with a reality, when it reports that, even though it gives to itself its own standard, she is the answer to a good that proceeds it" (Rosales, D. *Metaphysics of Violence and Peace. Topics*, 53, 2017, p. 284).

<sup>13</sup> *Politics*, I, 1. (Porrúa, México, p. 157). "Of all the things that the human mind can learn, there must be a science which is aimed to perfect human knowledge, and this one is called politics... If the most important science is the one that studies the most noble and the most perfect, it is necessary for the politics to be, among the practical sciences the most important, the one that leads the others, as long as it studies the last and perfect good and wellbeing for men." (Thomas Aquinas. *Proemio a la Política. Topics*, 3, 1992, pp. 135-136).

<sup>14</sup> ROSALES, *Op. cit.*, p. 293.

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