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Three Questions about Violence[1]

Vittorio Bufacchi

Abstract This article explores three philosophical issues regarding the concept of violence. First, violence is not just an act, it is also an experience. The study of violence should not focus exclusively on understanding actions that cause harm. Instead, a more phenomenological approach is required, one that prioritizes the experience of violence, especially those of victims and survivors of violence. Second, it is necessary to distinguish between "unwanted" and "unconsented" violence. Third, the definition of violence as violation of integrity or wholeness will come into scrutiny. In particular, to what extent does integrity as intactness apply to human beings, and if violence is defined in terms of breaking something intact, can violence be done to something that is already broken?

Keywords: *act; desire; phenomenology; integrity; survivors*

I remember the exact date when I started my research on violence: 9/11/2001. It was two weeks before the start of the semester, and I was preparing the syllabus for an undergraduate course I was set to teach, "Introduction to Political Philosophy." Originally the syllabus was going to cover a predictable mix of usual suspects in the history of political thought: Hobbes, Locke, John Stuart Mill, and John Rawls; it was going to suggest readings on some of the main concepts in political philosophy: liberty, democracy, equality, social justice. And it was going to highlight some of the main "isms" in the discipline: liberalism, socialism, feminism, and Marxism. But everything changed on that day.

When I faced my students in late September in my first lecture, I told them that I had scrapped what I thought I would teach them and what they expected me to teach them about political philosophy. Instead, I told them the course that year would focus on one concept: violence. I told them that cognitively speaking, I struggled to make sense of the images we all saw on television on 9/11, that I needed to make sense of what had just happened on that day, and that a university is the best place to engage with difficult topics, therefore for the next 12 weeks we were going to read a totally different body of literature: on violence, on political violence, on terrorism, on war, on torture, on civil disobedience. It was a challenging course but highly rewarding. It was emotional and raw, and I remember reading the material I had assigned to my students only a few days before giving the lecture. But apart from lecturing, I also listened, and I learned a lot from my students that year, as I always do.

I have been teaching this course on violence, political violence, and war for the last 20 years. The first year, in 2001, I had approximately 20 students. Ten years later,

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I had more than 100 students. Last year, in 2021-22, I had 77 students registered for the course.

The lectures I gave on violence in the first 5 or 6 years after 9/11 formed the backbone of my article "Two Concepts of Violence," published in 2005.[2] Two years later, in 2007, I published my monograph *Violence and Social Justice* with Palgrave Macmillan.[3] A few more publications followed in the coming years, principally *Violence: A Philosophical Anthology*,[4] and two special issues on violence, for *Global Crime*[5] and for *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*.[6]

In my book *Violence and Social Justice*, I took it for granted that before trying to make sense of the morality of violence, that is to say, whether violence can be justified, we must first define the concept of violence. Thus, the book is roughly divided into two parts: the first five chapters deal with the definition of the concept of violence, while the subsequent four chapters consider the morality of violence. I no longer think we can make this clear-cut separation between the definition of violence and the normative assessment of violence. Violence is a messy concept, and it does not lend itself to simple analytical distinctions, even though, as an old-style philosopher, I still believe in the merits of conceptual analysis as the starting point for philosophical reflections.

Apart from that, if I were to rewrite my book today, there are three things I would do differently:

First, many definitions refer to violence as an act; therefore, to study violence is to study the act of violence. I also made that assumption in my book. But is that all there is to violence? Is there more to violence than the act of violence?

Second, there is an assumption that violence is "unwanted." But what exactly does it mean to say that violence is "unwanted," and what does it say about violence when it is not unwanted? What is "unwanted" should not be confused with what is not being consented to. This distinction is important because while some acts of violence are both unwanted and unconsented (sexual abuse), we can consent to acts of violence while not wanting to suffer violence (a boxer entering a ring consents to the punching but will avoid punches landing on their face), and we also consent to things that for all means and purposes appear to be violence except that they are not (going to a dentist).

Thirdly, in my book I defended a definition of violence as a violation of integrity. This definition has many merits, and yet it is problematic and perhaps ought to be revised or replaced by a different definition.

I. Is Violence an Act?

There is an assumption in the literature that since violence is an act, to study violence is to study the act of violence. Thomas Pogge says that "a person uses physical violence if he deliberately acts in a way that blocks another's exercise of her legitimate claim-rights by physical means."[7] Other definitions do not use the term

"act," but they seem to imply it when they use terms such as "exercise" or "use." For example, the Oxford English Dictionary defines violence as "the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, person or property"; Norman Geras defines violence as "the exercise of physical force so as to kill or injure, inflict direct harm or pain on, human beings";[8] and Ted Honderich as "a use of physical force that injures, damages, violates or destroys people or things."[9]

At one level, it makes sense to think of violence as an act, as something that is done, which is why in one of the most influential definitions of violence in the literature Robert Audi suggests that we should think of violence principally as a kind of human action or activity: "Violence in this sense is always done, and it is always done to something typically a person, animal, or piece of property."[10] Thus, an assault is an act of violence; to humiliate someone is an act of violence; rape is an act of violence; war is an agglomerate of separate acts of violence; etc.

If violence is an act, then there must be an agent performing the act. By thinking of violence as an act, our attention immediately switches to the agent or agents performing the violence: their motivations, intentions, purpose, and desires. At one level, this is important, of course, but it also has a major shortcoming: violence tends to be analyzed exclusively from the point of view of the perpetrator of the act, and in the process, the survivors or victims of violence are no longer the focus, almost forgotten, merely dismissed as the helpless targets of the violence. This perpetrator-centered approach to the study of violence disempowers the victims and survivors of violence when instead, they should be at the forefront of our concerns. After all, the reason why violence raises important moral questions is not only because of what it tells us about the person doing the violence, but above all because of what violence does to those subjected to violence. That is why the work of Susan Brison, based on first-person narratives, is an invaluable contribution to the study of violence and a must-read book for anyone working on violence.[11]

In an essay I published with Jools Gilson in 2016, we discuss the limits of assuming that violence is simply an act since this assumption means that to study violence is to prioritize the actions of the perpetrators of violence.[12] We recommend shifting from a perpetrator-centered conception of violence to a survivor-centered conception of violence. Doing so has two advantages. First, it reminds us that while for the perpetrator an act of violence has a set timeframe, with a beginning and an end, for the survivor of violence it is a different story, with the ripples of violence enduring long after the act has finished.[13] The temporal indeterminacy of an act of violence is crucial to understanding the second point: violence is not simply something that is done or acted; instead, violence is something we experience, endure, undergo, and ultimately suffer.[14]

To think of violence not just as an act but also as an experience opens the door to a phenomenological approach to the study of violence, something that was missing in the book I wrote on violence in 2007.[15] I now compare violence to a disease. The dictionary definition of disease is a disorder that negatively affects the structure or

function of all or part of an organism. A disease is debilitating; it produces specific symptoms. All those things also apply to violence. Like a disease, violence is also a "disorder" in the sense that it causes havoc to something that was in order before the violence; like a disease, violence also negatively affects the life-structure or life-function of a person; like a disease, violence is debilitating; and like a disease, violence causes symptoms that may take a long time to get over, if ever.

II. Is Violence Always Unwanted?

If we explore violence from the point of view of the survivor, not the perpetrator, one question we need to ask ourselves is whether or not violence must be something unwanted. At *prima facie*, the answer seems obvious since we would expect violence to be unwanted. This is why, perhaps not surprisingly, we find the term "unwanted" used in some definitions of violence, for example by Bernard Gert, who refers to violence as "an unwanted intentional violation,"[16] and John Keane, who defines violence as "the unwanted physical interference by group and/or individuals with the bodies of others."[17]

Even though one naturally assumes that it is the unwanted nature of violence that makes it morally reprehensible, we must consider the possibility that violence can be morally problematic even if it is not unwanted. In my 2005 article "Two Concepts of Violence," I suggest that distinguishing wanted from unwanted acts of violence is important to distinguish between acts done with the intention to cause harm, like torture, from similar acts that are done with very different intentions, like a dentist pulling out a tooth. However, there is a risk that by making this distinction between what is unwanted and what is wanted, we fail to perceive certain acts of violence which fly under the radar by virtue of not being unwanted. I used the example of foot binding in China, although in hindsight, that's not a great example since the victims were often children rather than adults exercising their free will.

In a private conversation, Ethan Harris made two very valid observations on the question of whether violence is always unwanted. First, he points out that instances such as foot binding are not actually wanted, but rather the "want" is simply a by-product of other concerns (i.e., coercion or perverted societal or interpersonal pressures). I agree with this. In fact, in *Violence and Social Justice*, I make the point—which I attribute to an article by Evan Simpson from 1970—that in a hostile environment or in certain cultural settings one may become inured to almost anything, including injury. Therefore they may fail to recognize that they are being subjected to violence.[18]

Harris goes on to make a second point, which is equally valid: there is a risk that questioning what another person wants, on the basis that their wants are misguided, can potentially go too far. One could very well make the argument that nearly every one of our wants are influenced or generated by societal or interpersonal pressures. We might get around this challenge by saying that an action can only be violent if (in addition to the other relevant criteria) it is what one should not want. The issue

here, of course, is that this necessitates some degree of paternalism. This objection is important and needs to be dealt with.

A proper analysis of what is "wanted" or "unwanted" is beyond the scope of this article, as it necessitates a detour in philosophy of action.[19] Nevertheless, at the very least, we can distinguish between two ways to understand what we mean by a "want." A "want" could be a desire, the prospective satisfaction of which explains our rational choices. I want chocolate ice cream because I desire the taste of chocolate, so I go to the ice cream parlor and buy myself chocolate ice cream. Alternatively, a "want" could be dictated by reason (including a sense of duty) rather than desire. The point here is that there can be a dissonance between what we "want" and what we desire. I may not want to be an alcoholic, but I still *desire* to drink whiskey. For example, I could hold the belief that for the sake of my children, I ought to give up drinking. Therefore, I want to be free from alcohol addiction, and when I go to a party, I only drink water, even though I don't have a desire to drink water (instead, I have a desire for a whiskey.) In this case, our actions are triggered by reason (to be a good role model to my children) rather than desires (to have alcohol-fuelled wild times).

The dissonance between wants and desires also arises in the context of dutiful behavior. Our wants (but not our desires) could reflect our internalized sense of duty. Someone involved in an honor killing could act out of a sense of duty towards their family, not the desire to punish a family member. Someone may sacrifice their happiness to protect the honor of their family, and even convince themselves that they want what they are told to want.

In the example of honor killing, we want to believe that in certain contexts, people don't really want what they say they want. While at one level, this makes sense, according to Harris there is a risk of paternalism here since we assume to know what is best for others, and we don't accept the views they hold as legitimate or valid. In fact, this may or may not be problematic. "Paternalism" is a term that has negative connotations, to a great extent because of its patriarchal etymology. But if, instead of paternalism, we appealed to Habermas' communicative action, whereby our aim is an ideal speech situation, perhaps it isn't as worrying.[20] Yes, we hold on to the distinction between what someone wants and what they *should* want, but what someone should want is not determined by someone else in a position of authority who has the power to arbitrarily decide for those under their domination against their will. Instead, it is determined in relation to what Habermas calls ideal conditions of deliberation, where the emphasis is on the premise of being *ideal*: this means that in the process of deliberation there is no other force than the force of better argument: no prejudices, no ideologies, no restrictions on time or knowledge. Only the force of arguments that one could justify to others on grounds they could not reasonably reject.

III. Is Violence a Violation of Integrity?

In my book I put forward the following definition of violence: "An act of violence occurs when the integrity or unity of a subject (person or animal) or object (property)

is being intentionally or unintentionally violated, as a result of an action or an omission. The violation may occur at the physical or psychological level through physical or psychological means. A violation of integrity will usually result in the subject being harmed or injured, or the object being destroyed or damaged."[21] I now have some reservations about this definition.

There are, I believe, some good points about this definition: it includes both physical and psychological violence; it includes both actions and omissions;[22] it allows for both intentional and unintentional harm. The most distinctive aspect of this definition is the idea of violence as a violation of integrity, which is also the most controversial aspect.

Let me backtrack and explain how I came to this definition. First, I was looking for a middle road between two standard approaches to defining violence: the narrow definition, whereby violence is captured by the act of force, and the broader definition, where violence is captured by the violation of rights. The narrow definition is inspired by the Latin *violentia*, meaning "vehemence," a passionate and uncontrolled force, whereas the broader definition follows from the Latin *violare*, meaning "infringement" or a violation. In my book I argue that the narrow definition is too narrow, but the broad definition is too broad.

My definition of violence also starts from the assumption that violence is always a violation, but then we need to specify exactly what is being violated or infringed by the violence. I don't think "rights" is the right answer.[23] Instead, I argue that something else, even more precious, is infringed: our integrity. I opted for the concept of integrity because the integrity of a person is both physical and metaphysical (psychological), and it speaks to our essential vulnerability, to the fragility of our biological and social existence.

As I explain in the book, by integrity, I mean nothing more than the notion of "unity," or the quality or state of being complete or undivided. It is this idea of integrity as wholeness I found compelling. Thus, an act of violence is a violation of integrity to the extent that it damages or destroys a pre-existing unity. To be subjected to violence is to have one's integrity infringed, since in the process of being violated, a person is reduced to a lesser being, in physical and/or psychological terms.

The only reference to violence as a violation of integrity I could find in the literature was from a paper written by Gerald MacCallum but never published during his life. Here he points out that violence is wrong because it damages, destroys, or violates the integrity of the things so changed: "The human body is normally viewed as not merely an assemblage of parts but a system of more or less harmoniously integrated parts. When speaking of its integrity, we can thus be speaking of its completeness or wholeness as such a system."[24]

Although she doesn't use the term "violation of integrity," the biggest influence on my work on violence was the remarkable book by Susan Brison *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self.* Based on her personal experience, Brison analyses the

impact on her conception of her "self" after surviving a nearly fatal attempted sexual murder. The language Brison uses clearly suggests that the violence she suffered cannot simply be reduced to the physical harm or injury she suffered. Instead, it is the violation of her integrity, in all its different forms, that perhaps comes closest to doing justice to what she is describing.

I have since found other references to the idea of integrity and the person, which would add validity to my definition. For example, Martha Nussbaum argues that bodily integrity is a feature of basic human capabilities.[25] And, of course, bodily integrity is a right recognized in many human rights documents and legal jurisdictions around the world. But as many of my students have highlighted during our class discussions on the merits of defining violence as the violation of integrity, there are at least two areas where this definition is problematic.

First, is a person ever whole or intact? Given that we are not static, like an object, but always developing, growing, and changing, does integrity as intactness make sense in relation to human beings?

Secondly, assuming that we are intact, or whole, with integrity, and violence shatters our integrity, does it mean that any additional violence on something that is already broken is not a violation of integrity? In other words, can violence be done to something that is no longer intact?

Both questions are valid and deserve a response. Regarding the first question, one could say that integrity is not an endpoint but a process: we may never be fully intact, or whole, with full integrity, but at any moment in the trajectory, we are as whole or intact as we can be, with all the imperfections that are the trademark of the human species of course. In that sense, our somatic and mental integrity is defined as much by the way we feel about ourselves, as by some external indicator. So, a man or a woman in advanced age, notwithstanding the aches and pains and limitations that come with old age, will still feel that their integrity is violated if a burglar enters their house and assaults them. Integrity is also a state of mind, and paradoxically one can have more integrity living with some of the challenges of old age compared to the difficulties faced by youth, notwithstanding their greater physical strength.

On the second question, if the definition of violence as a violation of integrity does not allow for the fact that violence can occur even when someone's integrity has been compromised, then the definition is as good as useless. It can't be the case that the first punch is an act of violence because it shatters the integrity, but all the subsequent punches are not since there is no longer integrity. Similarly, all the bombs that drop on a city are violent, not just the first bomb. The way the definition of violence as a violation of integrity deals with this problem is by pointing out that each time something is done to us that takes us further away from our integrity, or intactness, it counts as an act of violence. A vase broken into two pieces is easier to put together again than a vase broken into a hundred pieces. Similarly, a person will suffer violence each time a piece of their integrity is shattered. Survivors of repeated

violence face bigger traumas, in part because of the perseverance of their ordeal. This is certainly the case with children.

IV. Conclusion

When I started reading about violence in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, I would never have thought that more than 20 years later, I would still be teaching and writing about violence. This is an indication of the fact that the subject matter is immense, very complex, and, unfortunately, still very relevant. My own views on violence have changed since I started writing on the topic, and I am still searching for answers. In this essay, I have considered and tried to answer three questions about the way we approach the study and definition of violence. Each question opens up even more questions and throws up more doubts about one's views. The only certainty I have about violence is the following: it is a subject that raises many philosophical puzzles, and therefore it deserves the attention of philosophers. I hope that in the years to come more philosophers will make violence the focus of their investigations.

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1. I am grateful to Ethan Harris and the editors of the *Washington University Review of Philosophy* for valuable comments on an earlier draft of this article.

2. Vittorio Bufacchi, "Two Concepts of Violence," *Political Studies Review* 3, no. 2 (2005): 193-204. This article has been cited more than 300 times, according to Google Scholar.

3. Vittorio Bufacchi, *Violence and Social Justice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

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5. Vittorio Bufacchi, "Rethinking Violence," *Global Crime* 10, no. 4 (2009): 293–97, with articles by John McCormick, John Baker, Michael L. Gross, Keith Krause, Joy Gordon, Ivan Perry, Jamil Salmi, Richard Mizen. Online at: https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/fglc20/10/4?nav=tocList. Later republished as a book: Vittorio Bufacchi, ed., *Rethinking Violence* (London: Routledge, 2009).

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8. Norman Geras, "Our Morals," in *Discourses of Extremity* (London: Verso, 1990), 22.

9. Ted Honderich, *After the Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 91.

10. Robert Audi, "On the Meaning and Justification of Violence," in *Violence*, ed. Jerome A. Shaffer (New York: David McKay Company, 1971), 138.

11. Susan Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

12. Vittorio Bufacchi and Jools Gilson, "The Ripples of Violence," *Feminist Review* 112, no. 1 (2016): 27–40.

13. Perpetrators of violence might also experience these "ripples" as those who commit acts of violence may be haunted by it long after the act is finished, as evidenced by PTSD experienced by soldiers at the end of the war.

14. On this issue, see Sofie Henze-Pedersen, "The Ghost of Violence: The Lived Experience of Violence After the Act," *Violence Against Women* 28, no. 1 (2022): 194-210.

15. On the phenomenology of violence, I would recommend Michael Staudigl, "Towards a Phenomenological Theory of Violence: Reflections Following Merleau-Ponty and Schutz," *Human Studies* 30, no. 3 (2007): 233-53; James Dodd, Violence and Phenomenology (London: Routledge, 2009); Michael Staudigl, "Towards a Relational Phenomenology of Violence," *Human Studies* 36, no. 1 (2013): 43–66; Alessandro Salice, "Violence as a Social Act," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 13, no. 1 (2014): 161-77.

16. Bernard Gert, "Justifying Violence," *The Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 19 (1969), 616.

17. John Keane, *Reflections on Violence* (London: Verso, 1996), 66-7.

18. Evan Simpson, "Social Norms and Aberrations: Violence and Some Related Social Facts," *Ethics* 81, no. 1 (1970): 22-35.

19. For an excellent textbook on the philosophy of action, see Lilian O'Brien, *Philosophy of Action* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014).

20. For a sympathetic reading of Habermas' speech-act theory, see Cooke, *Language and Reason: A Study of Habermas's Pragmatics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

21. Bufacchi, *Violence and Social Justice*, 43-4.

22. An omission is a non-action. We often think of violence as the result of a direct, physical action, like a punch or a kick, but violence is also often done when we fail to act, for example, by not intervening to prevent someone being harmed, or by gross neglect. See Bufacchi (2007), Chapter 3 "Violence by Omission."

23. I agree with Joseph Betz, "Violence: Garver's Definition and a Deweyan Correction," *Ethics* 87, no. 4 (July 1977), 341, when he writes: "If violence is violating a person or a person's rights, then every social wrong is a violent one, every crime against another a violent crime, every sin against one's neighbor an act of violence."

24. Gerald C. MacCallum, "What is Wrong with Violence," in *Legislative Intent and Other Essays in Law, Politics and Morality*, eds. M. Singer and R. Martin (Madison, WI: Wisconsin University Press, 1993), 243-4.

25. Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). See also Drucilla Cornell, *At the Heart of Freedom: Feminism, Sex and Equality* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), and Mervi Patosalmi, "Bodily Integrity and Conceptions of Subjectivity," *Hypatia* 24, no. 2 (2009): 125-141.