VIOLENCE AND LANGUAGE[1]

The importance of this subject derives from the fact that the confrontation of violence with language underlies all of the problems which we can pose concerning man. This is precisely what overwhelms us. Their encounter occupies such a vast field because violence and language each occupy the totality of the human field.

We would be entertaining a very limited and very reassuring idea of violence if we were to reduce it to one of the two extreme forms in which it is entirely and clearly itself: on the one hand murder, that is to say, death inflicted by man on man; or on the other hand, the strength of nature when it attacks man and cannot be tamed by him: the violence of a fire, of a hurricane, of a flood, of an avalanche, the violence of pain, of an epidemic. Between a murder and an avalanche, however, there is the whole realm of the intermediate, which is perhaps violence itself: human violence, the individual as violence. His violence has aspects of the hurricane and of the murder: on the side of the hurricane, it is the violence of desire, of fear, and of hate; on the side of murder, it is the will to dominate the other man, the attempt to deprive him of freedom or of expression, it is racism and imperialism.

Some will say that nothing is to be gained by stretching violence so far, that in so doing we blend all the forms into a great obscurity, and the specific problems posed by oppression or revolution, or by the private hatred of one man for another, are thereby watered down. I maintain, however, that the philosopher's task here is to take the largest view of the realm of violence, from its exterior nature against which we fight, through the nature within that overwhelms us, to, finally, the will to murder that, it is said, is nourished by each consciousness in its encounter with another.

For what unifies the problem of violence is not the fact that

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[1]The editor is grateful to Joseph Bien and to Paul Ricoeur for permission to republish this article by Ricoeur, translated by Joseph Bien, and published in *Political and Social Essays* by *Paul Ricoeur* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1974).

its multiple expressions derive from one or another form that is held to be fundamental, but rather that it is language that is its opposite. It is for a being who speaks, who in speaking pursues meaning, who has already entered the discussion and who knows something about rationality that violence is or becomes a problem. Thus violence has its meaning in its other: language. And the same is true reciprocally. Speech, discussion, and rationality also draw their unity of meaning from the fact that they are an attempt to reduce violence. A violence that speaks is already a violence trying to be right: it is a violence that places itself in the orbit of reason and that already is beginning to negate itself as violence.

Such is inevitably our point of departure: violence and language measure from one end to the other as two contraries each exactly adjusted to the whole extension of the other.

One might be tempted to stop here; and, in a certain sense, we shall not go beyond this starting point, but only reach it less abstractly, more concretely. For a person cannot argue for violence without contradicting himself, since by so arguing he wants to be right and already enters the field of speech and of discussion, leaving his weapon at the door. The formal opposition of violence and language must be granted provisionally by anyone who speaks. But as soon as this has been said, one has the irresistible feeling that this formal opposition does not exhaust the problem, but rather only encircles it with a thick line surrounding emptiness.

Why is this so? Because the opposition which we understand and from which we start is not exactly the opposition of language and violence, but--according to the terminology of Eric Weil in *La Logique de la philosophie*, the echo of which was recognizable in my introduction--rather the opposition of discourse and violence, more precisely of coherent discourse and violence. No one enunciates this coherent discourse, and no one possesses it. If someone attempted to possess it. If someone attempted to posses it, it would again be the violent person who, under the cover of fraudulently coherent speech, was attempting to make his philosophical particularity prevail.

I has just uttered a word: fraud. This word suddenly uncovers a whole somber world of falsified words which make

language the voice of violence. We started from the very neat and clear antithesis of discourse and of violence, and here against the background of this formal and, in its own realm, forever insuperable opposition a sentence emerges: violence speaks. That which speaks, in relation to the meaning, is violence. We are thus brought to explore all the intermediaries of violence and of discourse and violence.

It is quite obvious that such a problem would not have arisen if we had restricted ourselves to the anatomy of a language. It is only when we go on to a physiology of speech that such a question is capable not only of getting an answer, but more simply of being asked. Language is innocent--language meaning the tool, the code--because it does not speak, it is spoken. It is discourse which bears the problem that we are considering. It is the spoken word, not the completed, closed, and finished inventories which bears the dialectic of meaning and of violence. It is necessary then to penetrate the dynamism of language in order to encounter the struggle for meaning in its dispute with the expression of violence. Someone must express himself--not necessarily I, Mr. So-and-So, but my people, my class, my group, etc.--in order for violence to express itself. The intention of saying something must traverse this expression in order for the aim of a meaning to be able to oppose itself to the expression of violence. There is thus in speech--but not in a language--a narrow space in which expression and the desire for meaning join and confront each other. This is where the spoken word is submitted to the most extreme tension between violence and rational meaning. Language as speech is such that it is the place where violence reaches expression at the same time that the intention of rational meaning finds support in the quest for a referent that motivates our speaking.

I would like to approach more concretely this intersection of expression--which gives voice to violence--and of the desire for meaning--which gives voice to coherent discourse. I will look for it in words, or, more exactly, in denomination, the activity of naming, which belongs not to the language itself, but to the production of speech. Some may be surprised that I am speaking here of words as belonging to the order of speech, and thus of the sentence, and not of languages or their inventories. Are not

words lying quietly in our dictionaries? Certainly not. There are not yet (or there are no longer) words in our dictionaries; there are only available signs delimited by other signs within the same system by the common code. These signs become words charged with expression and meaning when they come to fruition in a sentence, when they are used and take on a use value. Of course they come from, and after usage fall back into, the lexicon; but they have real meaning only in that passing instance of discourse we call a sentence. It is then that they come onto the field of the confrontation between violence and discourse.

I would like to offer examples taken from three different spheres of our speech: politics, poetry, and philosophy. In these three spheres--which I do not in any way wish to classify hierarchically--the word, that jewel of speech, is the focus of violence and meaning.

When we think of politics, we think first of all of tyranny and of revolution; this is legitimate, but it does not come close to exhausting the problem. It may even hide what is most essential. It is in the normal exercise of politics that the original intersection of violence and meaning occurs. But let us begin with tyranny. In a tyranny it is obvious that violence speaks. This is so evident that philosophers have always opposed tyranny, the extreme of power, to philosophy, which is judicious discourse. Philosophy denounces tyranny precisely because it invades philosophy's territory: language. Tyranny indeed has never been the brute and mute exercise of force. Tyranny makes its way by seduction, persuasion, and flattery; the tyrant prefers the services of the sophist to those of the executioner. Even today, especially today, Hitler rules through Goebbels. The sophist Goebbels is necessary to create the words and phrases that mobilize hate, that consolidate the society of crime, and that issue the summons to sacrifice and to death. Yes, the sophist is necessary to give violence, one need hardly say that it mobilizes speech at the moment of the new awareness. There is no revolutionary project without consciousness or without the acquisition of consciousness, therefore without articulation of meaning. But political violence is not restricted to tyranny or revolution. Step by step everything political is touched by the turgid play of meaning and violence. And undoubtedly we

should speak first of meaning, for politics exists because the city exists--therefore because individuals have begun and partly succeeded in overcoming their private violence by subordinating it to a rule of law. The words of the city bear this universal mark, which is a kind of non-violence. But at the same time the community is politically united only because a force voices this form and communicates to the social body the unity of a will which makes decisions and imposes them in order to render them enforceable. Yet this great will, which is the law for individuals, is at the same time like a great irascible individual who at times speaks the language of fear, of anger, of offended dignity, of impudent boasting, that is to say, of violence. Thus the rule of law which gives form to the social body is also power, an enormous violence which elbows its way through our private violences and speaks the language of value and honor. And from here come the grand words which move crowds and sometimes lead them to death. It is through the subtle art of denomination that the common will conquers our wills; by harmonizing our private languages in a common fable of glory, it seduces our wills as well and expresses their violence, just as the juice of a fruit is expressed by squeezing.

Shall we say that such a misfortune happens only to political language? If it were to appear that the most innocent of languages--that of the poet--did not escape this double tension of meaning and violent particularity, we should then have to admit that it is all language that is thus defined and circumscribed. I hold that poetic language emerges from a certain opening that allows some aspect of Being to appear. I am here provisionally adopting Heidegger's description of speech as the submission to the prescriptions of a measure of Being to which man is originally open. This is the poet's way of giving himself up to meaning. His obedience is not submission, of which revolt or autonomy would be the contrary; his obedience resides rather in this resignation, in this "following," this letting-be. It is in this that the non-violence of discourse, of which the poetic verb is the most advanced element, consists. This is where language is least at our disposition but rather has man at its disposition.

And yet . . . and yet it is at this furthest point of non-violence that violent particularity is accumulated. How? Precisely in the

impact of the word, in the strength of impact of the word; to bring being to language, according to Heidegger, is to bring being to the word. Now the word, the formation of a name, Heidegger says, "establishes a being in its Being and thus preserves it in its openness." To preserve that which is open? Here the subtle violence, which the Gospel says forces the realm, is settled and sublimated; in words, in the capture of being by words, things become and are. An openness that is a capture, such is the poetic word, in which the violent particularity of the poet is expressed in the very moment that he abandons himself and surrenders to uncovered Being. The violent man appears at the very point where being and meaning *unfold*: in the *arrival*, in the *maturation* of the word. The poet is the violent man who forces things to speak. It is poetic *abduction*.

I will conclude this joint review of violence and discourse with a few words in philosophical language. I quite agree with Eric Weil that philosophy is entirely defined by the desire for meaning, by the choice in favor of coherent discourse. What openness is for the poet, order and coherence are for the philosopher. But this very intention and the steps that the philosopher can take in this direction risk obscuring the hidden link between discourse and the violent particularity of the philosophical individual.

There is, first of all, the violence of the violence of the initial question: the philosopher is a man seized by the specificity of a question of the *cogito*, the question of the synthetic *a priori* judgment, even the question of Being. But the philosopher always comes to thought through the narrow gap of a single question. Violence and point of departure? Violence of the point of departure? To begin is always an exercise of force, even and especially when one begins with absolute substance, as does Spinoza.

Then there is the violence also of a particular trajectory: the philosopher is one who articulates the various elements of his discourse within the horizon of a tradition, which is always a particular tradition, using words already burdened with meaning; no philosopher can totally recover the totality of his presuppositions. There can be no philosophy without presuppositions.

There is finally the violence of the always premature conclusion: philosophy exists only in books which are always brought to a close too quickly, intercepting the process of totalization in an arbitrary termination. This is why all philosophies are particular even though everything is to be found in any great philosophy. and as I am myself one of the violent particularities, it is from my particular point of view that I perceive all these total particularities that are also particular totalities. The hard road of the "loving struggle" is the only road possible.

In concluding I would like to draw several theoretical and practical conclusions from this confrontation. The former essentially concern the notion of rational meaning, of rational discourse, which underlies all this reflection. I wish to say three things in this regard. First, this discussion has meaning only if we are able to speak of the goal of language. It is not possible to confront language and violence, nor even to set them together, without a certain project of language, without a goal. It is on this level of goals that the search for meaning gives violence an opposite. Yet is it not dangerous, even illusory, to speak of a goal of language? for who knows where it is going or what end it serves? Final causes have long been criticized by philosophers from Descartes to Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche. And yet the critique of finality, understood as a final term imposed from without on a mechanical process, does not exhaust the question of meaning, for true finality is not an end proposed from the exterior: it is the full manifestation of the orientation of a dynamism. This investigation thus forces us to return to Humboldt's view of the genesis of language as the complete manifestation of the mind, as its self-manifestation, its unfolding in plenitude. Without this vocation of language to wholly express the thinkable it is not possible to enter into a dialectic such as the one which occupies us today.

Second, to speak of rational meaning is not to speak only of the understanding of calculation or instrumental intelligence. To the contrary, any reduction of reason to understanding conspires in the end with violence. For the only thing indeed which then becomes thinkable is the organized struggle against nature. The construction of an individual or collective history becomes

senseless. It is not surprising, therefore, that in this age of planning, intelligence is confronted only by the radical opposition of the beatnik or the absurdity of the aimless crime; it is only in the world of the organized struggle against nature, in a world which has reduced its project of rationality to this struggle, that pure crime--killing for the sake of killing--is conceivable.

Thirdly, when the intelligence of calculation takes hold of language itself, it produces the same effects of nonsense. To know the structures of language does not advance one a step in rational meaning. For what is in question is the meaning of discourse, not the structure of the keyboard on which it plays. The problem of language in confrontation with violence is not the problem of structure, but rather the problem of meaning, of rational meaning, that is to say, of the effort to integrate in an inclusive understanding the relationship of man to nature, of man to man, of existence and meaning, and, finally, this very relation of language and violence. The illusion by which structural intelligence is held to exhaust the understanding of language is encouraged by the belief that structural knowledge, by putting the subject between parentheses, gives freedom from the egocentric illusion. But an understanding which does not also comprehend its subject--in the double acceptation of the term, neither surrounding or penetrating it with meaning--is a dead intelligence, a separated intelligence. Regardless of appearances, it provides no resistance to an anarchic and violent affirmation of the subject, precisely because the subject is evacuated from its field of investigation. It is not surprising that the most senseless cult of personality flourishes precisely where the most fanatical negations of the subject are uttered. Every merely instrumental intelligence, because it does not understand its own carrier, is the accomplice of violence, of the senseless affirmation of particularity. Instrumental intelligence and senseless existence are the twin orphans of the death of meaning. This is why only a work of thought in which the thinker understands himself in a meaningful history can comprehend both discourse and its opposite, violence.

But how do we live this intermediate situation between meaning and violence? To answer this question is to ask oneself what the practical implications of the initial opposition of

discourse and violence are. I shall limit myself to assembling a few simple rules for the proper use of language in its confrontation with violence.

We must continue to hold it to be a formal, though empty, truth, that discourse and violence are the most fundamental opposites of human existence. Bearing continual witness to this fundamental opposition is the only condition for recognizing violence where it is and for having a recourse to it when it is necessary. But he who has never ceased pointing violence out as the opposite of discourse will be forever safeguarded against being its apologist, against disguising it, and against believing it superseded when it has not been. Recourse to violence always must remain a limited culpability, a calculated fault; he who calls a crime a crime is already on the road to meaning and salvation.

It is necessary not only to retain as a formal truth the non-violence of discourse, but to bear witness to it as an imperative: the "Thou shalt not kill!" is always true, even when it is not applicable. He who upholds it continues to recognize the other as a rational being and attempts to honor him. Furthermore, he retains for himself the possibility of again entering into discussion with his adversary; in time of war he will never commit an act that will render peace impossible. In this manner the pressure of a morality of conviction can be maintained on the morality of responsibility. The place of the testimony of the non-violent man remains marked in history. By his out-of-place, untimely gesture the non-violent man bears witness for all men to the goal of history and of violence itself.

The second series of conclusions does not contradict the first: to recognize violence where it is, even to have recourse to violence when it is necessary, does not exclude the recognition of the place of the testimony of the non-violent man in history, for if non-violence alone belongs to the morality of conviction, on the other hand the morality of conviction can never take the place of the morality of responsibility. The dialectic of the morality of conviction and the morality of responsibility expresses our position even in the interspace of discourse and violence.

The third rule for the proper use of language concerns what I will call the non-violent practice of discourse itself. Violence in

discourse consists in the claim that a single one of its modalities exhausts the realm of speech. To be the non-violent in discourse is to respect the plurality and diversity of languages. It is to leave the modes of discourse in their proper places: here the language of calculation and all the languages of understanding, there rational meaning and its project of totalization, in another place mythical interpellation and prophetic language, which open man to the very origin of the meaning which he does not have at his disposition but which has him at its disposition.

Respect for the multiplicity, diversity, and hierarchy of languages is the only way for men to work towards rational meaning.

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