

REVERSIBILITY AND ETHICS: THE QUESTION OF VIOLENCE*

Summary

This paper argues against two theoretical standpoints. The first contends that all human action entails violence. The second contends that discourse, the traditional alternative to violent confrontation, is itself necessarily violent. I contend that the conjunction of these two theses obscures significant differences between violent and non-violent human behavior and, thereby, atrophies a legitimate moral animus against violence. The standpoint I defend rests on the assertion that humans are capable of direct perceptual experience of the pain of other humans, that this experience is the ground phenomenon of morality, and that it allows us in principle to adjudicate between violent and non-violent action, to distinguish among kinds and degrees of violence, and to assess evidence bearing on questions of vindication and culpability.

I

We do not have a choice between purity and violence but between different kinds of violence. Inasmuch as we are incarnate beings, violence is our lot. . . . Life, discussion, and political choice occur only against a background of violence. What matters and what we have to discuss is not violence but its sense or its future.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*.¹

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The question of violence: is violence intrinsically bad, or is it value neutral? The question cannot be answered by definitional fiat because any definition put forward would have to be shown to be adequate to the relevant phenomena, and relevance is determined by definition.² The etymology of 'violence' is nonetheless revealing. The proximal source is the Medieval Latin *vis* ("force"³ "strength, especially as exercised against someone"⁴) which can be traced to the Indo-European *wi-*, *weíá-* ("vital force"⁵), the root of the Latin *violare* ("to force, to do violence to, hence especially to rape"⁶). The roots are value neutral, but the derivatives are laden with negative value. The ambiguity here, I will argue, is essential: force has the essential propensity for destruction; the question remains whether that propensity ineluctably manifests itself in some way, as Lord Acton implied in his well-known assertion to the effect that power inevitably leads to some degree of corruption. The question is illumined by etymology, but cannot be answered by appeal to etymology.

¹Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, trans. John O'Neill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 109.

"Nous n'avons pas le choix entre la pureté et la violence, mais entre différentes sortes de violence. Le violence est notre lot en tant que nous sommes incarnés. . . . Le vie, la discussion et le choix politique n'ont pas lieu que sur ce fond. Ce qui compte et dont il faut discuter, ce n'est pas la violence, c'est son sens ou son avenir." Merleau-Ponty, *Humanisme et Terreur, Essai sur le Problème Communiste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), pp. 117-18.

²The circularity here may be hermeneutic in the sense that it invites us to query our presuppositions thereby allowing us to thematize latent attitudes sedimented in our heritage. But hermeneutics will not give us a defensible answer to the question; at best it can only reveal our commitments. Hermeneutics is prolegomenon.

³Pokorny, *American Heritage Electronic Dictionary* (Houghton Mifflin, 1992).

⁴Eric Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (New York: Greenwich House, 1983).

⁵Pokorny.

⁶Partridge.

I should also acknowledge that the question as posed presupposes a narrowing of the domain of violence to the human sphere. I am writing here of violence as forceful imposition of human will. This excludes the notion of violence as rapid change. Thus, hurricanes are not violent unless they are conceived as means used to impose the will of some anthropomorphic being, and even then the violence would properly reside in the domain where agency intersects with the means employed to carry out its intention.

Merleau-Ponty, writing in 1947 before his momentous break with Sartre⁷ over the issue of communism, outlines the argument which contends that the question is not one of violence, which, being the human lot, is inevitable, but of the deployment of violence. The context of the quotation cited above is an exposition of Marxist doctrine set forth as a prelude to a critique of communist ideology and praxis. The critique was precipitated by the unearthing of the atrocities of Stalinism, the Party purging, the labor camps, the eradication of human life in the name of humanism, and in response to Arthur Koestler's depiction of the Bukharin trial in his novel, *Darkness at Noon*. Given Merleau-Ponty's evolving attitudes toward Marxism, one cannot definitively say that in the passages cited here Merleau-Ponty was speaking only for Marx and not for himself as well (although I am quite sure that he did not subscribe to the position stated in the quotation).⁸ Whether

⁷Sartre and Merleau-Ponty "disagreed over the role and efficacy of the Communist Party: Sartre moving more toward political activism, Merleau-Ponty developing a skeptical position concerning marxism as a guideline for political practice. In 1955, Merleau-Ponty published *The Adventures of the Dialectic*. This text marks the break that had already occurred. Disagreements about the role of dialectic carried into their common editorial work for *Les Temps Modernes*, and finally, in 1953, Merleau-Ponty resigned definitively from the editorial board." Hugh J. Silverman and James Barry Jr., "Introduction" to *Texts and Dialogues: Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Silverman and Barry (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1992), p.xvi.

⁸Although I cannot argue the point here, I am sure that this was not Merleau-Ponty's own standpoint. In "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" (written in 1951-52), he argues in favor of a theory of expression based on painting and language which points toward the universal, toward the goal of reducing or eliminating violence .

"... The fact that each expression is closely connected within one single order to every other expression brings about the junction of the individual and

in 1947 Merleau-Ponty endorsed the position stated in the quotation is only marginally relevant to the question of the soundness of the supporting arguments. What is relevant is that the political standpoint he attributes to Marxism is challenged by the ethical implications of the thesis of reversibility he developed in his later writings.

“What matters is not violence but its sense (*sens*) or its future.” The issue raised in this assertion is not reducible to the tired old ends-means dispute.⁹ That debate presupposes that we have a choice whether or not to deploy violent means. This presupposition is ruled out by the claim that “we do not have a choice between purity and violence but between

the universal. . . . A philosophy of history does not take away any of my rights or initiatives. It simply adds to my obligations as a solitary person the obligation to understand situations other than my own and to create a path between my life and that of others, that is, to express myself. Through the action of culture, I take up my dwelling in lives which are not mine. I confront them, I make one known to the other, I make them equally possible in an order of truth, I make myself responsible for all of them, and I create a universal life.”

“Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 73-75.

“. . . L'intimité de toute expression à toute expression, leur appartenance à un seul ordre, obtiennent par le fait la jonction de l'individuel et de l'universel.

. . . Une philosophie de l'histoire ne m'ôte aucun de mes droits, aucune de mes initiatives. Il est vrai seulement qu'elle ajoute à mes obligations de solitaire celle de comprendre d'autres situations que la mienne, de créer un chemin entre ma vie et celle des autres, c'est-à-dire de m'exprimer. Par l'action de culture, je m'installe dans des vies qui ne sont pas la mienne, je les confronte, je manifeste l'une à l'autre, je les rends compossibles dans un ordre de vérité, je me fais responsable de toutes, je suscite une vie universelle”
“Le langage indirect et les voix du silence,” in *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), pp. 91-94.

⁹The standpoint taken here is that it is a mistake to separate ends from means, that in the sphere of human action one must consider both intent and instrument. The intent to force one's will upon another by means of compelling argument should be assessed differently from a like intent executed with firearms. And, conversely, lethal damage done to another is properly evaluated in light of motive: we distinguish between (degrees of) murder, manslaughter, and accidental death. In general, judgments are better when they seek to maximize rather than minimize consideration of relevant evidence.

different kinds of violence.” Merleau-Ponty states the case for this claim later in the same paragraph.

He who condemns all violence puts himself outside the domain to which justice and injustice belong. He puts a curse upon the world and humanity -- a hypocritical curse, since he who utters it has already accepted the rules of the game from the moment that he has begun to live. Between men considered as pure consciousnesses there would indeed be no reason to choose. But between men considered as the incumbents of situations which together compose a single *common situation* it is inevitable that one has to choose¹⁰

We have no choice but to be violent. That is, our only choice is how to behave in a common situation, and that action or inaction will necessarily produce violence. Only if we were disembodied consciousnesses could we have the choice to be pure, that is, the choice not to violate others by imposing our will upon theirs in a manner contrary to their interests and wishes. The only choices, forced upon us by our situation, are whom to violate, and how; and those choices are driven by the crucial question of why. To oversimplify, humanism amounts to a choice to promote universal ends rather than particular ones, but either choice -- to serve human interests at large or that of a narrow elite -- involves some form of terror. One cannot cite terror and violence as grounds for condemning action for they are the consequences of all action, including inaction: “to abstain from violence toward the violent is to become their accomplice.”¹¹

¹⁰*Humanism and Terror*, p. 110.

“Si l'on condamne toute violence, on se place hors du domaine où il y a justice et injustice, on maudit le monde et l'humanité, -- malédiction hypocrite, puisque celui qui la prononce, du moment qu'il a déjà vécu, a déjà accepté la règle du jeu. Entre les hommes considérés comme consciences pures, il n'y aurait en effet pas de raison de choisir. Mais entre les hommes considérés comme titulaires de situations qui composent ensemble une seule *situation commune*, il est inévitable que l'on choisisse” *Humanisme et Terreur*, pp. 118-19.

This is a radical position. Like all radical positions, it simplifies complex judgments. For example, it rules out pacifism as a political ideology; it obliterates the distinction between those committed to non-violent means and those who deliberately use terror; *de jure* it conflates all moral differences between warfare conducted between combatants in accordance with the Geneva conventions and warfare conducted in the streets against non-combatants. We are all complicit; we are all combatants. The operative moral disjunction is between the hypocrite who thinks it is possible to remain pure or aloof and the authentic person who resolutely acts with the awareness that purity of any kind is an impossible ideal, one which is finally guilty of obscuring moral responsibility.

II

The opposite position is equally radical (as is generically the case with binary oppositions). This position holds that violence is essentially related to some form of moral negativity, although that premise does not serve to distinguish this position from its Marxist opposite. The differentiating postulate is that there is always an alternative to violence, always a viable choice between violent and non-violent action. Given this postulate, complex judgments are once again simplified: all other factors being equal, the morally justifiable choice is always to seek out non-violent means.¹²

The always available alternative to violent action is discourse, in particular or, more generally, an appeal to ideality, symbolism, moral exemplarity. Discourse, communication based on principles of rationality, is *ceteris paribus* always preferable to violence. The deployment of violence is war; the peace process is essentially linked to rational discourse.

¹¹*Humanism and Terror*, p. 109.

“. . . S'abstenir de violence de violence envers les violents, c'est se faire leur complice." *Humanisme et Terreur*, p. 119.

¹²Or, at least, to choose the least violent of the available options. This modification, however, renders the standpoint non-radical.

Here we arrive at the crux of the matter at hand. Only if there is a genuine distinction between the sword and the pen, between warfare and discourse, can there be an alternative to violent action, given the inevitability of conflict among divergent perspectives. If one holds that discourse is itself a form of violence, that discourse is inseparable from violence, then the first form of radicality, the Marxist thesis of the inevitability of violence, wins by default, and violence becomes once again a morally neutral category. Mooting the question of which has the stronger force, if the pen is intrinsically mighty, if it has force (*vis*), and if force rigorously entails violence (*violare*), one can no longer cite discourse as an always available alternative to violence.

The argument in support of one currently popular version of the thesis of the violence of discourse draws its force from semiological reductionism.¹³ The violence of signifiers is inescapable because all experience is mediated by signifiers and is meaningless without them. Signifiers assign events to places within a symbolic matrix, and this assignment, given human finitude, is always to some degree arbitrary. The violence is the arbitrariness. Merely to perceive another is to assign that person a place within my matrix of concepts and symbolic sensitivities, within the world view that has evolved from my cultural heritage. Thus, to perceive a thing is exactly not to perceive that thing as it is in itself; it is to violate the ipseity of the thing, to force it into a place that cannot be its own. This is inevitable because we are always on the near side of the bar that bars us from the signified.

Regarded through the semiological reduction, language is the primal mother of all acts of violence. Even the deliberate attempt to deal with others in an appropriate way, in a way that is proper to given persons or groups, depends upon a transcendental projection of appropriateness that has its source in the system of signifiers which, being superscribed upon me, governs my saying, thinking, feeling, and doing. To do what is

¹³The thesis that I designate with the term 'semiological reductionism' is articulated in *Semiological Reductionism: A Critique of the Deconstructionist Movement in Postmodern Thought* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1995). Here I can provide only a synopsis.

right is always and only to do what one thinks is right from one's own point of view. Human action is, thus, violent in its appropriation of others: it necessarily violates the other's propriety. The meaning others have for me, including the meaning I have to the other that is my unknowable self, derives from the ideality of the system of signifiers within which I dwell, not from any reality that anyone could know or experience directly.

Is there, then, no significant difference between the violence of perception or experience and the violence of rape¹⁴ or other forms of physical abuse? At the level of the first intention, clearly there is: even within the semiological reduction, one distinguishes between raping and looking, touching and talking, between physical and non-physical forms of abuse. At the meta level of reflective analysis, however, ambiguity and obscurity intrude. *Whatever distinction might be drawn, it cannot be a distinction between violence and non-violence.* Can it then be a matter of kinds or degrees of violence? Perhaps an example would be helpful.

In the brochures that define sexual harassment at my institution, no juridical distinction is made between forms of behavior that involve touching, speaking, and looking (they are all and equally forms of harassment); nor do these brochures assign different degrees of culpability, different levels of punishment (although I trust that these differences are taken up when specific cases are tried). The difference between the violence of a sexually harassing look and that of a non-sexually harassing look would reside in the presence or *absence* of sexual content. And that would depend upon the mental state or intentions -- conscious or unconscious -- of the looker. But, within the context of the semiological reduction, that would be beyond the ken of all parties. It would depend upon the system of signifiers operative within the person passing judgment: in no case would it be possible to *present* evidence relevant to the judgment. The evidence would have to be as intrinsically ambiguous and multi-determinable as the offending look, itself. Even if, contrary to the deconstruction of the notion of presence, one were to grant that person X looked at

¹⁴The French verb, *violer*, means to transgress, to desecrate, to enter unlawfully, to rape. The verb is used to translate the English 'rape'.

notion of presence, one were to grant that person X looked at person Y, that such an event occurred -- was *present* -- at a given time and place, it would be impossible for both jurors and participants to determine whether or not the look, itself, had sexual content or sexual significance.¹⁵ The look, itself, falls on the side of the signified.

Is there a fallacy¹⁶ embedded in this example? The question about discriminating among kinds and degrees of violence is answered by an example illustrating the indeterminability of one species, sexual harassment, of one kind of violence, the look. Surely there is a difference between this kind of violence (looking) and others that belong in the domain of touching, the generic category of rape. The difference would have to do with some distinction such as that between physical and psychological damage. Here is one person who

¹⁵In a pamphlet dated December 1997 issued by the Office of Affirmative Action and the University Ombudsman of Binghamton University bearing the title "Sexual Harassment: Definition, Policy, Response and Prevention" the following passage appears under the heading "Safeguarding Against Sexual Harassment Charges."

- Be aware of how your behavior may be interpreted by and may impact other people, and remember that *it is the impact of behavior, not the intention behind it, that is of concern.*

I interpret this to mean that the precept articulated in note 9 above that intent is relevant to moral assessment has been abandoned. I would extend this interpretation to speculate that at least one factor in abandoning the precept is the belief, fostered by semiological reductionism, that the presence or absence of a given motive cannot be determined.

One consequence of this standpoint is to privilege the testimony of the plaintiff: the plaintiff's interpretation of the defendant's intention is decisive; the defendant's intention, itself, is not of concern -- even though it is that intention that makes the look or touch, i.e., the behavior, offensive.

- Physical conduct such as unwelcome hugging or touching, intentionally brushing up against someone's body

This passage is taken from the section of the pamphlet entitled "What is Sexual Harassment: General description."

¹⁶Specifically, the fallacy Irving Copi calls "converse accident" in which "one considers only unusual or atypical cases and generalizes to a rule that fits them alone." *Introduction to Logic*, 7th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1986), p. 100.

has been sodomized with the wooden handle of a toilet plunger.¹⁷ And there is another who has been offended by a prurient look or genital exhibition or perhaps even a verbal proposition requesting *fellatio*.¹⁸ The first has internal injuries requiring hospitalization and surgery, the second has suffered an indignity but no physical abuse.

If violence is defined as a collision between semiological systems, the *prima facie* distinction between the presence and absence of physical damage to body or property atrophies. It atrophies because the damage referred to, that which is signified, can never be *present*, even to witnesses or the victims themselves.

What can be inferred from this example? Within the context of semiological reductionism -- in which all meaning derives from transcendental violence -- violence atrophies as a measure of moral judgment. *In fact, transcendental violence itself, conceived as a violation of ipseity, is parasitic upon a latent appeal to some form of presence just because ipseity presupposes the presence of a being whose meaning is irreducible to any string of signifiers, but which can be the subject of experience and cognition.*

The philosophical mistake of semiological reductionism illustrated by the examples offered lies in a basic error in reasoning, a *non-sequitur*. From the true premise that language, as the vehicle of culture, pervades the entirety of human experience, one infers that the significance of all persons, places, and events is *exclusively* determined by the cultural forms or signifiers that inform our experience of them. The *non-sequitur* resides in the claim that meaning derives exclusively from signifiers. To arrive at this conclusion, one needs the additional premise, supplied by radical forms of transcendental epistemology, that meaning (or significance or the relations among persons, places, and events) is ideal, always and only the projection of immanent forms such as the concepts and categories constituted by signifiers. This premise

¹⁷I am referring here to charges brought against a member of the New York City Police Department for committing the action described against a Haitian immigrant who had been taken into custody for a minor offense.

¹⁸The reference here is to litigation now pending in which the plaintiff is Paula Jones and the defendant is William Clinton.

has the effect of ruling out the possibility that the persons, place, and events, themselves, play a crucial role in the formation and application of immanent forms or signifiers. It forecloses the thesis, defended here, that to call a given creature a cat is determined in some measure by the nature of the beast, itself, and that the same is true of all objects of experience, even though they may be as ambiguous as human sexual behavior and the motives or intentions influencing its various forms.

Ambiguity resides in the multi-determinability of things, in the fact that things can be interpreted in the context of a host of competing systems of signifiers. Judgment, the ineluctable element in all moral assessment, is the process of determining which of the competing systems of signifiers, or schemas of interpretation, best fits the case at hand. And that requires empirical research, the attempt to assemble evidence that favors one interpretation above its competitors. The fact that evidence is also ambiguous and multi-determinable complicates the process of judgment. It is also true that evidence can be compelling: eyewitness testimony, fingerprints on the murder weapon, Presidential DNA in the traces of semen that might have been found (but, apparently, were not) on Monica Lewinsky's clothing.

In assessing the many sources of evidence in cases of violence, there are two that are both highly relevant and highly ambiguous: one concerns the suffering of the victim, the other concerns the intentions of the agent. I have argued that the fundamental tenets of semiological reductionism exclude both sources. Now I must try to show that we do, in fact, have access to them.

Within the context of the ethics of reversibility,¹⁹ where I am capable of direct experience of another -- where I can directly perceive the intentions of others in their bodily comportment, where it is possible for me to sense the sense of another's sensing of me -- that perceptual experience provides

¹⁹Once again, only a capsule version of the standpoint at hand can be given here. See M.C. Dillon, "Merleau-Ponty and the Reversibility Thesis," *Man and World*, Vol. 16 (1983), pp. 365-388, and "La carnalidad del amor: percepción e historia," *Areté*, Vol. IX, No. 2 (1997), pp. 219-234. An English version of this essay will be included in a book now in preparation the working title of which is *Beyond Romance: The Philosophy of Sexlove*.

an evidential basis for judgments I may make about it. And, given the phenomenon of context, the evidence can be supported by other evidence relevant to the first, other evidence that is in principle communal and accessible to third parties.²⁰ Within the context of the ethics of reversibility, it would be possible, at least in principle, for jurors to decide whether an act of sexual harassment involving looking had taken place. This is not to deny the ambiguity that pervades experience, not to assert that clarity is anything more than a goal to be approximated; it is, however, to claim that there are grounds for judgment and that these grounds, being commonly accessible, are capable of eliciting agreement from others. It would be possible to make a fallible but still non-arbitrary judgment as to whether the plaintiff's claim were true. In the other case, the fact of sodomy could be much more easily established because the evidence is far more tangible and concrete, i.e., perceptible. And, in both cases, the degree of severity of punishment in the case of guilt could also be assigned in a non-arbitrary way: jurors could assess the degree of damage, not only through evidence, but also through reversibility, the human capacity to feel the pain of those who suffer.

III

Back to the question of violence, the question whether violence is intrinsically bad or value neutral.

We have before us two theoretical edifices that support the thesis of the inevitability of violence in human action. One, the Marxist position, is a materialism: all action in a common situation violates others by its material impact upon their bodies and lives. The other, the deconstructionist position, is a transcendental idealism: signification, itself, violates ipseity. Taken together, they erode the distinction between violent and non-violent human action, and thus obscure the issue whether

²⁰In the case of the sexually harassing look, words spoken, other actions performed, social and physical setting, historical narratives about the perceived behavior of the parties involved, and so on are all relevant as is evidence attesting to the nature of the action in question.

violence is itself morally objectionable. The classical alternative to violence is discourse, but, if discourse itself is conceived as intrinsically violent, the recourse to discourse is, at best, but a shift from one modality of violence to another. If all action is violent, violence atrophies as a useful category in the moral evaluation of human behavior.

The failure of both positions lies in their radicality, their global pronouncements in a domain where discernment and judgment are essential. This failure is not without merit. Marx reminds us that every action has a political dimension: the baker is not as close to armed conflict as the general or the covert insurgent, but no war or guerrilla insurgency was ever waged without tacit consent and logistical support from the non-combatant infrastructure. And deconstruction has succeeded in demonstrating the pervasive and insidious effects of systems of signifiers operating beneath the level of deliberation and awareness: no war or insurgency was ever waged which did not draw its fervor from inchoate systems of symbols. As G.B. Shaw once said, a good cry is worth half the battle.

Granting that, there are still consequential differences between generals and bakers, ideologues and poets: history judges them differently. International war crimes tribunals punish combatants and, for the most part, let the civilian infrastructure alone. The distinctions operating here can find no ground in global pronouncements and radical theses. How do we assign moral responsibility when it is a matter of the violence of the pen and the sword? How should we?

The primordial ground of moral assessment is the transfer of corporeal schema, the recognition of another human body as like unto oneself, coupled with the transitivity of pathos.²¹ This recognition or identification of living bodies across the difference of spatial separation is founded upon the phenomenon of the reversibility of flesh. Violence, as the forceful imposition of one will upon another, is a refusal to respect and honor difference or ipseity, that is, a refusal of the mutuality revealed through the perceptual intertwining of flesh.

²¹See M.C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 2nd ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), pp. 113-129.

The transitivity of pathos is not exclusively positive, but rather runs the gamut from love through hatred to indifference. Indeed, the very recognition that grounds love also grounds hatred, intimacy being a condition for intensity of both positive and negative pathos. The hypothesis that informs my present thinking is that neither can appear in pure form: no love without its shadow, no hatred without affinity. I cannot develop this thought here, and can only set it forth as a postulate: intensity of pathos is inversely proportional to distance in psychic and physical space. Nor can I explore the psycho-social motivations of vengeance and threat; I can only stipulate as fact that we do inflict damage on one another, that the threat posed by others who differ significantly from oneself can be real as well as imaginary. The affinities that promote friendship are mirrored by differences that generate enmity; both are grounded in recognition and reversibility: I can sense your hostility as directly as I can sense your amity. (Of course, these perceptions are far from apodictic and discernment is crucial: as Freud pointed out, the reality principle is essential to survival among all higher primates, ourselves included.)

Given the reality of hostile others, given a threat that is genuine, consequential, imminent, and beyond mediation, violence will occur. Terror abounds -- we have no dearth of instances -- and when terror touches us, it co-opts, engages us one way or another; terror also preempts, can narrow our real alternatives down to the primordial choice between fight or flight. Whether or not it is always preferable to negotiate, it is not always possible. To attempt to negotiate in the teeth of an implacable foe may sometimes be heroic; at other times it may be fatally stupid.

On these grounds, I am prepared to argue in favor of justifiable fights, justifiable recourses to violent means.²² But that is tangential to the question of violence as I have posed it here, that is, the question whether violence is intrinsically bad. My conclusion is that violence is, indeed, intrinsically bad, even

²²This includes preemptive acts of violence. All acts of violence, even acts of self-defense, retaliation, and retribution, are essentially preemptive of further harm.

when it is warranted and can be justified. In a fierce fight, the victors do not walk away unscathed; those who are not killed are marked or maimed.

There can be good fights and just wars. But the injunction against moral binaries is well taken: good people die in wars and everybody gets injured in a fight. There is no purity, but there is moral vindication. Some acts of violence are justifiable, and some are irredeemable. And there is a third class rife with imponderables. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: "all action and all love are haunted by the expectation of an account which will transform them into their truth. In short, they are haunted by the expectation of the moment at which it will finally be known just what the situation was."²³ This means, among other things, that it may take a long time for the vindicating or condemning judgment to consolidate historically. And every case is always open for review: those who are celebrated at one time may be ridiculed or condemned at another.²⁴

If violence can, in some instances, be vindicated, then the violence of an action is, *eo ipso*, insufficient grounds for its moral condemnation. But its intrinsic badness also means that violence is, *eo ipso*, the court of last resort, the least favorable alternative, something to be avoided, a moral negative. Violence is harmful, but there are other things that are worse. To master the means of violence . . . is to confront the invitation to abuse it; not to master the means is to deliver that invitation to others. As I read history, there seems always to be some who have been willing to accept the invitation, to exploit weakness.

Given the negativity intrinsic to violence, mediation is always preferable if not always possible. The ultimate ground of mediation is truth. Truth commands assent, hence can provide a common measure across differences in perspective.

²³"Indirect Language," p. 74.

" . . . Toute action, tout amour est hanté par l'attente d'un recite qui les changerait en leur vérité, du moment où enfin on saurait ce qu'il en a été . . ." "Le langage indirect," p. 93.

²⁴The case I have in mind is Christopher Columbus. Others might be cited.

Discourse can conceal truth as well as reveal it. Discourse as falsification and dissimulation is, no doubt, a form of violence. But discourse of itself is not originary violence; fallible as it is, it is our prime recourse against violence. As disclosure of truth, as expression of a perspective,²⁵ discourse allows us to measure conflicting perspectives against a non-discursive and obtruding perceptual reality that provides a measure among them. We are all openings upon the world, openings separated by differences in perspective. Through the reversibility of transfer of corporeal schema, we are capable of seeing through eyes other than our own. Through the reversibility of discourse, through the listening which opens us to otherness, we have the option of transcending the biases that separate us and discovering a common ground.²⁶ Discourse can create meaning, establish relations, to be sure, but that creation is mimetic: the viability across perspectives of discursive meaning has its measure in the world. Meaning derives from the world: from what other source could it come?

Conclusion

Let me begin with two disclaimers: I do not deny that discourse can be violent, or that some instances of discourse are more violent than some instances of physical injury. Spanking a child to enforce a precept that will guide the child toward its own higher interests is far different, far less violent, than to teach the child through shame that he or she is worthless. My thesis depends rather on the assertion that not all acts of discourse are necessarily violent. Think of a weather report: it does not do justice to either sunshine or rain, certainly not to a hurricane or a moonrise, but in violating the ipseity of these events, it benignly helps us to dress appropriately and provides work for poets. Still, pressing questions remain.

Is it always preferable to choose the least violent option? Is discourse always preferable to physical means? Can this distinction between pen and sword, diplomatic and military

²⁵Or what I have latterly called an amscan.

²⁶See note 8 above.

means, rational discourse and brute force, ultimately be sustained?

I have characterized violence as the imposition of one will upon another contrary to the volition of the latter. Given the ethics of reversibility, the recognition of the will of another embodied intelligence reinforced with the resonance of pathos, the suffering of the patient is shared and constitutes a negativity that dissuades. Good parents avoid violence and maximize co-option whenever that is possible, and do so for the sake of their own sensibilities as well as those of their child. Given that children require discipline to develop their capacities for reasoning, a program of rearing that completely eschews violence may serve as an ideal, albeit one that cannot be fully realized: babies do not willingly forsake the breast, do not seek to control their processes of evacuation voluntarily, have to be taught to respect and honor the legitimate needs and wishes of others.

The threat of a rogue, be it state or individual, might be attributed to infantility equipped with machinery of destruction. One seeks -- if one can -- to discipline rogues. In the best case, one educates the headstrong infant to recognize that the locus of its genuine long-term interest lies in the universal, that is, in the ideal state of affairs which minimizes the suffering of all (as opposed to a *de facto* universal which may not be genuinely universal at all but merely serves the interests of a currently prevailing power). It is well if the benign parental figure²⁷ in this scenario is equipped with the means of reinforcement but is appropriately reluctant to deploy them. Failing that, there is only moral suasion and the long-term power of truth. Only history can determine whether that power is sufficient; and history, one hopes, is without end. My optimism here is tempered by the awareness that individuals have always suffered in the process of historical change.

²⁷Given the principles of universality and rational co-option underlying the thesis articulated here, it should be apparent that this figure could not take the totalitarian form of a supreme ruler, be it philosopher king or earthly divinity.

My answer to the first question is, thus, affirmative: the optimal course is always the one that genuinely seeks to enlist the freedom and reason of all parties.

My answers to the second two questions are far more ambiguous -- and necessarily so, given the nature of the answer I have given to the first. The optimal course is not always open, and the crucial tests come when it is not. The difference between violent and non-violent means is not abrupt, but a matter of degree and circumstance. A big stick is a strong argument, even when it remains resting on the shoulder of might. There is merit to the argument that contends that discursive (or psychological) suasion is parasitic upon the peripheral presence of real (or physical) power, that brute force is finally decisive. For the individual, at least, death is an absolute to which there is no riposte, and brute force is vectored toward death. Notwithstanding the power of this argument, however, I contend that the distinction between physical and psychological force is non-ultimate. If time allowed, I would defend my belief that beneath this distinction there are others at work such as those between immediate and long-term consequences, and between individual and global effects. Martyrdom is a case in which the violent death of an individual (Socrates, Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr., etc.) is decisive, to be sure, but decisive in exactly the opposite way from that intended by the perpetrators of the violent acts.

In the first section of this essay, I quoted Merleau-Ponty's assertion that "between men considered as pure consciousnesses there would . . . be no reason to choose [between violent and non-violent action]." This is admittedly a contra-factual hypothetical statement and subject to criticism on those grounds, but the point it makes is crucial. The patient of violence is a sentient body, a corporeal intentionality for whom the line between intelligence and embodiment is always only provisional and discernible only under specific circumstances. We do not go to a psychiatrist with an aching tooth, but the dentist has to contend with our pain and our fear. My thesis is that there is a spectrum of psycho-physical force bounded by the impossibility of purity on either end: no purely physical force, no purely psychological force, but always an

intertwining in which one aspect or the other may weigh more heavily.

This continuum of psycho-physical force does not coincide with the continuum from greater to lesser violence in action. As noted in the case of spanking or shaming a child, there can be an action which is more psychological than physical on one continuum, but still belongs toward the violent end of the other. This exception to what may otherwise be a reliable rule has important consequences for the thesis being set forth here.

Although the threat of brute force subtends most cases of psychological violence, it is minimal in cases falling in the domain of pride and shame. Although it is a human weakness to behave shamefully when fearful of physical harm, it is a prime source of human nobility to go in harm's way for the sake of pride and the need to act in conformance with one's highest ideals. Our heroes large and small are ones who have chosen to suffer physical harm rather than shame, to bear the ennobling scar on their flesh. Conversely, we may be driven by ill-founded pride and psychological-historical commitment to inadequately considered ideals to use force in shameful ways.²⁸

Here we arrive at the thought that has guided the broad strokes of this ungainly essay from the start, the thought that the question of violence is finally a question of love-hate-indifference. Nobility, acting in accordance with one's highest ideals, ideals founded ultimately on the pathos of reversibility, is the locus of the criteria by which to judge violence. The Greek word inadequately translated into English as 'nobility' is to kalon. The Greek idea expresses an ideal of comportment, prior to any distinction between inner and outer or spirit and body, designated by the famous triad that names the object of desire: the good, the true, the beautiful. To kalon as it informs the flesh of the world is what we love, what we need, lack,

²⁸Here I would cite Nazism, the Spanish Inquisition, and the holy wars and crusades of many sects.

want, desire in others as well as ourselves. It is the basis on which we judge all things, including violence.²⁹

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²⁹The Greeks, following Socrates, corrupted the ideal of to kalon by elevating the mind above the flesh and pointing it toward the purity of an afterworld. Christianity exacerbated this corruption by demonizing the flesh.

It would be a mistake to interpret the values set forth here as a form of secularized Christian humanism. The values defended are secular in the extreme, and humanistic in the minimal sense that they are confined by the inability of the author to transcend the humanity he is attempting to stretch; they are Christian to the extent that Christianity draws upon a worldly source of values -- as all value systems must -- despite its efforts to the contrary.