UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Ontology and Ethics of Violence:
A Theory

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Philosophy

by

Valentina Ricci

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Ermanno Bencivenga, Chair
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2016

DEDICATION

To my mother,

Who taught me the importance of potentiality
and what it means to fight for its actualization.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.
(Simone Weil)

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my committee chair, Professor Ermanno Bencivenga, who showed me the way back to the pleasures (and pains) of philosophy, and encouraged me to write on a topic I was passionate about.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Ontology and Ethics of Violence:
A Theory

By

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Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy

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Philosophical discussions about violence tend to lack conceptual clarity, which makes them confused and often unhelpful. The dissertation aims at bringing about such clarity by analyzing the meaning and scope of the concept of violence. I examine three kinds of views about the ontology of violence (the physicalist, the structural, and the maximalist view) and defend a version of the maximalist view that incorporates elements from the notion of structural violence. In the last chapter, I explore the ethical implications of my view and defend an ecological approach to ethics in order to best deal with such implications.

INTRODUCTION

The object of this dissertation is the notion of violence. Few concepts are so present in our everyday conversations and in the public debate with so little agreement concerning their meaning and their application. We hear this term every day in the news, we read about it in the newspapers, we *see* violence happen around us. Violence is one of the dominant topics in political debates and scholars in many different disciplines make it the object of their study and research. Concerns about how to reduce or defuse violence are largely present both in national and international politics and in academic scholarship. However, debates about the nature of violence and its ethical and political implications are often unproductive and confusing. The main reason for this is that there is little (if any) agreement about the issue, and those who talk about violence often do not even agree on the very meaning of the term and the kind of phenomena it should describe.

Some people tend to reduce the application of the term "violence" to the domain of the physical, and thus claim that it only makes sense to talk about violence insofar as we are referring to episodes of intentional aggression against the body of another person. Those who support this minimalist approach believe that we should reserve the term "violence" only to cases in which bodily injury is involved. Examples of these cases range from punching someone to shooting them, to killing in war. As a consequence, minimalists oppose the use of this term to refer to other kinds of phenomena, such as various forms of psychological abuse, hate speech, systematic or institutional oppression, the exploitation and destruction of the environment, the impossibility for many people to access the basic resources needed to live a minimally decent life, etc. They believe that the term "violence," in these cases, can *at most* be used as a metaphor

and that using it as if these acts or phenomena were *actually* cases of violence would be wrong, as this would confuse our understanding of the facts and make the concept of violence unhelpful by depriving it of a precise grasp.

At the same time, the debate on violence is characterized by a highly rhetorical use of the term, which is thus often bent in several directions depending on political need. For example, the term may be employed in order to describe a political protest with the aim of discrediting it. This move depicts the status quo as neutral (or non-violent) and anything that opposes it as disruptive or violent. The decisions we make about what to call violence and what to *not* call violence make a substantive difference to the way we structure our understanding and narrative of individual events and more general circumstances: clarifying the semantics and ontology of this term is thus not merely an intellectual exercise pursued for its own sake, but a crucial task we need to carry out in order to create the conditions for an orderly and clear discussion about violence.

Given this situation, the aim of this study is to bring clarity to the debate by first identifying the main views being discussed and defended in the literature. The debate on violence is extremely rich and features a great variety of options concerning the definition of violence. In order to treat such debate more effectively I distinguish three main definitions: the physicalist, the structural, and the maximalist one.[1] In the first three chapters I analyze these views and then defend a version of the third.

In the first chapter I present the physicalist definition of violence and show its limitations, which become insurmountable especially if it is taken unilaterally, as the only valid one. On this view, violence is the intentional infliction of harm or injury to *the body* of another. The major

[1] Distinctions of this kind – although sometimes organized along different conceptual lines – can be found, among others, in V. Bufacchi, "Two Concepts of Violence," *Political Studies Review* 3 (2005) no. 2: 193–204; W. Schinkel, *Aspects of Violence: A Critical Theory*, Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010; and M. Vorobej, *The Concept of Violence*, New York: Routledge 2016.

challenges to this view come from two points of view: the first has to do with the nature and boundaries of the body, while the second with the relationship between the body and the psyche. On the one hand, thus, I show that there are cases in which the boundaries of the body are not as clear as defenders of this view would like to think, which is the main reason why they think this kind of definition can be clear, specific, and unambiguous. I consider, for example, the fact that each culture holds that there is an appropriate distance individuals should keep from one another. We often see invasions of the personal space "surrounding" our properly physical body as forms of aggression against our person: this, in my view, shows that the boundaries of the body are not as clearly defined as we tend to think, and can extend beyond the materiality of the body itself. In addition, I discuss the legal distinction between assault and battery and emphasize it as another way in which we tend to recognize even forms of *threatened* physical aggression as forms of aggression that can be sanctioned both ethically and legally. Finally, I discuss the relationship between the body and the psyche in the context of violence and show that the physicalist account runs into problems when trying to keep them separate, as some authors do for the purposes of keeping the definition minimal and the boundaries clear: for example, by looking at forms of psychological violence that cause bodily harm or at forms of physical violence that cause psychological harm. Overall, the chapter shows that the physicalist definition is inadequate for its own purposes, because it cannot account for *bodily* violence – its central notion – clearly. Moreover, as I mentioned above, this definition is inadequate especially insofar as it is taken as identifying violence's only sphere of action, that is, if the meaning of violence as physical aggression is considered to be the only legitimate meaning. My goal, by contrast, is to show that our account of violence should be able to say what *it is* to do violence to someone and to show

that all the ways in which we use the term can be understood by reference to that meaning, in ways that will become clear in the course of this work.

The second chapter is devoted to a family of theories that expand the semantic and conceptual field of the notion of violence to a substantial extent. I call "structural" in a general sense the kind of definition that these theories propose, whether implicitly or explicitly. In this context, I discuss theories of violence emerging from Marxist philosophy, feminist philosophy, and philosophy of race. More specifically, I deal with theories whose focus is a specific kind of violence exercised on individuals and social groups not only by clearly identifiable agents with the intent to create bodily injury, but by complex and multilayered economic, social, and political structures that act at several, often undetectable levels. In the course of this chapter I show that the forms of oppression and violence analyzed and conceptualized by these disciplines can be understood through a definition of violence proposed by Johan Galtung at the end of the 1960s. Galtung defined structural violence as the set of economic, social, and political factors responsible for the difference between the potential and actual realization of an individual. I believe that this kind of definition points in a promising direction for the purposes of finding an adequate definition of violence, but is still a limited one insofar as it is mainly concerned with the material aspects of existence, and in general with factors whose significance can be traced back to such aspects.[2]

In the third chapter I thus propose a version of the third view, which I call "maximalist." This kind of view associates violence with a basic mechanism that informs everything we do. A central aspect of this view is that it often keeps the ontology of violence – the description of its nature, its features, and its functioning – clearly separate from ethical considerations or

[2] See for example Galtung's discussion of cultural violence, which he understands as the violence characterizing a cultural framework that somehow legitimizes or support physical or structural violence. J. Galtung, "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 27 (1990), no. 3: 291–305.

evaluations. In this chapter I thus propose an account of violence that takes Galtung's definition as its starting point, but extends it beyond the material aspects of our lives. I thus define violence as the feature of any act that produces suffering in the subject that receives it and that may cause the limitation, reduction, or suppression of their potential. This approach has the advantage of subtracting the definition of violence from the influence of our moral judgment of an act, and to move the burden of an ethical evaluation to a purely ethical, independent reflection, thereby freeing the ontological question and making it less vulnerable to rhetorical uses of the term. The ethical reflection, thus, is not excluded by the larger discussion on violence, but is simply treated as a separate part of the debate.

A definition of violence based on the notion of the reduction of human potential requires, of course, a reflection on the notion of potentiality. Part of the third chapter is thus devoted to such reflection: I propose an analysis of the Aristotelian notion of potentiality and discuss its contemporary application within the capabilities approach, particularly in the version presented by Martha Nussbaum. The account I propose in the third chapter seems a promising solution to the problem of defining violence insofar as it provides a conceptual structure that accounts for a variety of forms of violence and that explains what legitimizes the use of this term in order to name a range of apparently unrelated phenomena. In this sense, an important outcome of this chapter is that it shows that the different meaning of the notion of violence emerging from the debate are not incompatible: we do not need to choose between them. On the contrary, my view provides a broader, dynamic framework that incorporates and explains all of them as stages of a process that constitutes the unfolding of violence.

Some problematic implications also emerge from my view, however: in particular, my discussion of the notion of human potential shows that it is ultimately impossible to actualize

one's potential in full or to actualize everybody's potential, and that each actualization of the potential takes place at the expenses of someone else's potential or of some of one's own potentials. As a consequence, my ontology of violence depicts a world of acts and interactions that are inevitably characterized by violence. This may seem as a discouraging result, and it is definitely one that poses several important questions for the ethical reflection. The fourth chapter deals with these questions. First, I offer an account of action – thereby providing a more systematic treatment of some insights that emerged in the course first three chapters – as an alternative to the ordinary, liberal account that sees the individual as the primary unit of analysis within ethical discourse. I then take a stance about the debate on ideal and nonideal theory and propose a combined approach that starts from the recognition of non-ideal circumstances, but at the same time does not forgo the task of offering normative ethical principles. The principles I propose address the human community as a whole, which I regard as an ecosystem: from this view follows a focus on the balance and flourishing of the whole as the ultimate aim our ethics should pursue. My view is thus a form of rule consequentialism that defines the right actions as those following principles that, if accepted, would determine the best consequences, that is, the flourishing and balance of the human ecosystem.

One could observe that my view is far removed from what we ordinarily mean by "violence," and I agree with that. My goal in this dissertation, in fact, is *not* to offer a conceptual clarification of our ordinary use of the term. Clarifying and articulating the common use of a term is without doubt a valuable operation, but the kind of operation I am interested in is entirely different. Sally Haslanger describes the first kind of operation – the clarification of our ordinary use of a term, whereby we answer the question about "what is *our* concept" of *x* – simply as

conceptual analysis.[3] She contrasts it with two different things we can do when asking what something is: she calls the second "descriptive." A descriptive project looks at, and tries to understand, how we *actually* use a concept in our social practices. In other words, while a conceptual analysis will tell us what we think we mean by a concept, the descriptive analysis will look at how we use such concept. Haslanger uses the example of tardiness and of its ordinary definition, and contrasts it with the social practices associated to this concept in different schools, which will highlight different, more variable meanings for the concept of tardiness. She then defines a third kind of conceptual operation, which she calls *ameliorative* (or sometimes normative): in this case, conceptual analysis is aimed at *suggesting* a particular meaning for our concept, the way we think our concept would best serve the purposes of understanding our social reality and addressing the issues it presents.[4] Haslanger writes: "If we allow that our everyday vocabularies serve both cognitive and practical purposes that might be well-served by our theorizing, then those pursuing an ameliorative approach might reasonably represent themselves as providing an account of our concept […] by enhancing our conceptual resources to serve our (critically examined) purposes."[5] In what follows, my aim is thus to propose a definition of violence that, however different (i.e. rather different) from at least some of the ways in which we usually employ the term, or precisely because of this, will do a better job from the conceptual, ethical, and political point of view, and will offer a helpful conceptual tool to disciplines such as

[3] S. Haslanger, "What Are We Talking about? The Semantics and Politics of Social Kinds," *Hypatia* 20 (2005), no. 4: 10-26, here 12. See also S. Haslanger and J. Saul, "Philosophical Analysis and Social Kinds," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 106 (2006), no. 1: 89-118. Haslanger refers to Quine's notion of explicative definitions as the basis for her idea of an ameliorative definition. See W.V.O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in Id., *From a Logical Point of View*, New York: Harper and Row 1963.

[4] Ann Cudd, who follows Haslanger's distinction in her study of the notion of oppression, describes this approach as suggesting a "preferred use." See *Analyzing Oppression*, New York: Oxford University Press 2006, 4: "I take the normative concept to be the right sense of the term, the way that, on reflection, we want to use given a full assessment of how it is explicitly and implicitly use in our culture."

[5] Haslanger, "What Are We Talking about?," 12-13.

feminist philosophy and the philosophy of race, as well as, in general, to philosophical reflections on the nature of oppression and exploitation.

The research on violence is not neutral: depending on what we say, and what we decide to call "violence" or not, we represent entirely different worlds, and characterize our actions in very different ways. It is thus extremely important to work toward what Mark Vorobej, in a recent book on violence, has called "violence literacy."[6] Whatever position one decides to take with respect to violence, in this sense, it is crucial that the conceptual distinctions at play in its definition and their implications are clear. Who wins the battle over the meaning we want to attribute to the term, then, is a different issue, although definitely not a less important one. What emerges from this dissertation is that defining violence in one way rather another is to make precise choices about what we want to cast light on. The discussion on the ontology of violence, then, is not less important than the discussion on the ethics of violence, if it is true that the dictionary is a battlefield.[7] As a consequence, ontology becomes – as in a myriad other cases – the primary battlefield, as it is highlighted by the vivacity of the debate and by the recurring "waves" of philosophical reflection on violence that have characterized the field.

To engage in a conversation with this debate in its entirety would have been impossible, at least in the context of this study: as a consequence, I had to make some choices, and often difficult ones. Authors like Jacques Derrida or Emmanuel Levinas had to be left aside, as well as Hannah Arendt or Walter Benjamin, who were essential for the development of my reflections at the initial stage of my research but could not find room in the articulation of these reflections at the present stage. In addition, I had to make an important choice concerning the *scope* of my discussion: the sphere of violence, especially once one adopts my definition, is extremely large,

[6] M. Vorobej, *The Concept of Violence*, 1.
[7] See for example E. Bencivenga, *Parole che contano* [*Words that Matter*], Milan: Mondadori 2005.

and I had to decide what to focus on. This study is thus exclusively focused on violence on and between human beings. However, as I hope I will be able to show in the course of the future development of my research, my account can be extended and applied to other living human beings and to inanimate entities. The work that will have to be done for the purposes of extending my account will have to deal in particular with the discussion of the potentiality of these different beings – understood as their function – and of what their well-being amounts to. Finally – and this is a remark concerning my approach to the discipline – I made choices that often brought me outside what is officially considered professional philosophy and what are considered the legitimate places of its expression. These enabled me to build connections with disciplines that philosophy can no longer afford to ignore if it want to stay loyal to its nature, that is, in Hegel's words, to be "its own time apprehended in thoughts."[8]

[8] G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Rights,* Transl. by H. B. Nisbet and Edited by A. W. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991, 21.

CHAPTER ONE

Violence and the Body: The Physicalist View

The aim of this chapter is to start laying the foundation for a comprehensive account of violence. In order to build such an account, I will start by examining the most minimal definition of violence, which I call the "physicalist account,"[1] and test it against some problematic or ambiguous cases to see if it is solid enough to account for them. The following discussion will show that, if we aim for a coherent theory of violence, we need to broaden the scope of, and complicate, our explanation of the nature of violence.

The physicalist account aims to reflect the ordinary, basic use of the term in our everyday language and may therefore be regarded as the standard definition of violence as the forceful violation of the integrity of another person's body: Coady, who is one of the main proponents of this view, refers to the dictionary definition of the violence as "the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on or damage to persons or property."[2] The advantages of such an account, according to him, are that (1) it provides a straightforward, clear, and unambiguous definition of the term, which in turn enables to clearly identify instances of violence and to distinguish them by instances of other, potentially similar phenomena; and (2) that it is a neutral account, one that

[1] In the literature one can find several labels for this kind of definition, such as "restricted," "narrow," "minimalist," etc. I prefer "physicalist account" because it stresses the central feature of this kind of definition.

[2] C.A.J. Coady, "The Idea of Violence," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 3 (1986) no. 1: 3–19. See also his "Violence," in E.J. Craig (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Routledge 1998 and *Morality and Political Violence*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. I take Coady's work as the main reference for my discussion of the physicalist kind of definition because his account is a particularly clear example of a strictly physicalist definition. Other authors propose similar accounts, but with a variety of nuances. See for example J. Dewey, "Force, Violence and Law," in V. Bufacchi (ed.), *Violence: A Philosophical Anthology*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2009: 11-14; A. Bäck, "Thinking Clearly about Violence," *Philosophical Studies* 117 (2004) , no. 1: 219–30; N. Geras, "Our Morals," in Id. *Discourses of Extremity*, London: Verso 1990, 21-58; T. Platt, "The Concept of Violence as Descriptive and Polemical." *International Social Science Journal* 44 (1992), no. 2: 185-192. In this context, however, I am mostly interested in discussing a *type* of definition – or, in other words, a basic characterization of violence – than in discussing the details of the individual accounts that fall under the physicalist umbrella. For detailed examination see V. Bufacchi, "Two Concepts of Violence," *Political Studies Review* 3 (2005) no. 2: 193–204, and Id., *Violence and Social Justice*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

leaves moral considerations aside or treats them as a separate, independent part of the issue. More specifically, Coady believes that competing accounts, which include a broader set of phenomena under the term "violence," incorporate a negative moral evaluation, or in some other cases a justification of violence, in their own definition. On the contrary, he claims that we need a neutral definition of violence in terms of the *kind of act* the term applies to, in order to leave room for the subsequent work of moral evaluation.

In what follows, I shall first examine the physicalist account in some detail and show that the advantages described above are mainly apparent. At a closer look, in fact, this account is not as straightforward and unambiguous as it promises to be. To begin with, it starts from a definition of the kind of act a violent act is, but encounters a problem, namely that of distinguishing cases in which the infliction of injury through the application of force counts as violence and cases in which it does not. In order to do that, some accounts introduce the idea that violence is the illegitimate use of force. This, however, poses a further question, namely how to account for the legitimacy of the agent's use of force – which becomes, in some cases, a complex issue in political philosophy. Such solution, then, seems to complicate an account that is supposed to avoid the shortcomings of broader, competing accounts. In addition, it is not clear why the standard for a good account of an entity or concept would amount to its being straightforward and simple: in cases where the entity or concept to be explained is complex and multi-layered, the opposite standard may be appropriate. In other words, if the *explanandum* is complex, a complex and detailed account may be more adequate and precise than a simple one, which in turn may hinder an adequate understanding of the phenomenon by oversimplifying it.

The second issue has to do with what it means to violate the integrity of the body by harming it. There are a number of cases in which physical contact does not seem strictly

necessary in order for a violation of someone's body to take place. Examples of this are the legal distinction between assault and battery, and the idea, present in all cultures, that there is a "space" around each person's body that somehow pertains to their body, the violation of which is considered and experienced as a violation and, sometimes, an aggression. These examples show that the reference to the body and to its "boundaries" does not actually simplify the definition of violence, but actually complicate it.

Finally, the question must be addressed of cases in which bodily harm or injury manifest at a later time with respect to the performance of the violent act. This leads to the discussion of cases of psychological violence, the violence exercised on another person's psyche, which can have both psychological and physical effects. Some versions of the physicalist account do not accept psychological violence as an actual form of violence, but only admit the use of the term "violence" to describe such cases in a metaphorical sense. Other versions of this account accept psychological violence, but emphasize its isomorphism with physical violence in order to avoid the tendency to include other phenomena such as structural violence as legitimate forms of violence. Whichever position one may take on this issue, and whether a physicalist definition treats psychological violence as an actual form of violence or not, it seems that psychological violence poses a serious problem for this kind of account.

The last section of the chapter addresses the second supposed advantage of the physicalist account, namely its neutrality. As I will show, this kind of definition is *not* morally or politically neutral: on the contrary, by focusing exclusively on subjective, individual, and physical acts of violence – and thus by refusing to take into account the context that produces them (a "violent background," one may say) – it ends up being functional to a very *specific* moral and political stance with respect to violence, which is not justified within or by physicalist accounts, but

seems to be often assumed from the start. This consideration provides the connection to the next chapter, where I address definitions of violence that take into account forms of social, institutional, and economic inequalities and understand them as constituting in themselves a fundamental form of violence, namely structural violence.

1. *The Body and Its Boundaries*

As I already mentioned above, an example of a physicalist definition of violence is: "the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on or damage to persons or property." Let us break this definition down into its main constituents: first of all, violence is an instance of *force*. Force, in turn, can be defined as the strength or energy accompanying physical action or movement: force is thus a term that refers to the energy necessary to perform an action or movement. The definition of the concept of force in physics can help us further refine this idea: force, in this context, is understood as an influence or interaction that tends to alter the motion of a body or to produce motion or stress in a stationary body. Force, in this sense, is what is necessary in order to produce an interruption or disturbance in the initial condition of a body: if the body is already in motion the application of force will determine a change of the body's velocity (that is, a positive or a negative acceleration); if the body is stationary, the application of force will originate motion or cause stress in the body itself. Two aspects of the notion of force are particularly important for our discussion of violence: first, there is force each time two bodies (or objects) interact; second, physical contact between the two bodies is not required, because force can be effective "at a distance," as is the case with gravitational, electrical, and magnetic force. If we now return to the definition of violence, we can add some more detail to it: according to the physicalist account, violence is a form of strength applied to a body. If the

body's initial condition is stationary, violence will produce movement in it, whereas if the body is already in motion, violence will change the nature of its motion or put it to rest. In both cases, the key effect that the exercise of violence has on a body is that it alters its initial condition by imposing a new one. The change, however, is not a neutral or indifferent one, but one that causes injury or harm, or in other words one that *subtracts* from the body and brings about a worsening of its conditions or of its *health*. For present purposes, we may consider health as the condition of a normally functioning and intact body.

These elements help us shed light on some aspects of the definition of violence especially concerning what *happens* when violence is exercised, at least in some of the cases that most people would normally accept as instances of violence. These cases include "beating a person up, punching, striking, or wrestling with him; trampling him, vigorously pushing him around, and sharply and forcefully slapping his face; burning someone, stabbing him, flogging or flaying him; raping someone, shooting him, running him over with a motor vehicle, and dragging him behind a horse or vehicle; dropping bombs or napalm on people […]".[3] Why do we regard these cases as easily recognizable instances of violence? The distinctive aspect of the physicalist definition is that it focuses on the infliction of bodily injury or harm and considers it as the defining feature of violence, to the exclusion of other, less tangible forms of violence. The occurrence of bodily injury or harm, in other words, seems to constitute the main criterion for the identification of an act of violence. But is this really a straightforward criterion? Not all instances in which injury or harm are inflicted and the integrity of the body is violated are so clearly and

[3] R. Audi, "On the Meaning and Justification of Violence," in J. A. Shaffer (ed.), *Violence. Award-Winning Essays in the Council for Philosophical Studies Competition*, New York: David McKay, 1971, 45-99, here 51-52. This is a selection of the examples Audi presents among the clear cases of violence, i.e. the ones everybody, under any conditions, would accept as such. Audi does not, however, support a strictly physical definition of violence, but proposes a broader account that also includes psychological violence and violence against property or potential property.

unanimously acknowledged as instances of violence, and this is where the physicalist account encounters its first problems.

Let us then discuss this criterion in greater detail: in order to do that, we need to examine what it means, exactly, to cause bodily injury or harm. This, in turn, means that we need to think about the body itself, and more specifically about its boundaries, a point that – as I will show – can be quite problematic for this kind of definition. To begin with, then, let us think about what it means to cause physical injury or harm. Above, I referred to a negative change in the conditions of the body, an interference with, or worsening of, its health, understood as normal functioning of its parts and organs. One way to understand this as a form of violation of the body is to focus on its *integrity* as what is infringed upon through the act of violence or aggression. However, not all forms of infringements on the body's integrity count as violence, nor do they need physical contact to actually take place for them to be perceived, or to count, as cases of aggression or violence.

The violation of the body's integrity can take place in a variety of ways, but not all of them count as violent. A surgeon performing an operation on the body of a patient, for example, does violate her patient's bodily integrity in a much more severe way than she would if she hit another person with a slap or a punch. However, only the latter kind of act is regarded as violent. In order for an act to be defined as violent, then, it seems insufficient to describe it in merely physical terms, i.e. through the explanation of the mechanics of the action. It seems necessary, rather, to introduce a further element. Such element could be either (1) the fact that the violent act is performed without the authorization or consent of the person who is receiving it, and therefore it falls under the notion of an illegitimate or unjustified use of force; or, (2) the fact that the violent act is performed with an intent to harm, whereas the surgeon's act is performed with the aim of

producing a positive change in the patient's body and therefore in her health (the goal, in most of these cases, would seem precisely that of restoring health as the body's condition). An act causing injury, thus a technically "violent" one according to the physicalist definition, may be justified if the goal of the act itself is considered a valuable one.[4]

The latter option (2) is quite problematic, as it shifts the emphasis on the agent's intention, complicating the issue in a way that a minimalist account would perhaps not be ready to accept. Stressing the aspect of the agent's intention, for example, would raise the issue of evaluating an act performed with "good" intentions which ends up causing bad outcomes: would that count as a violent act? This option does not seem viable unless at a substantive cost, as its proponents should accompany the theory of violence with an account of the role of intentions and how they relate to their consequences. The former option (1), on the other hand, is a common solution among physicalist theorists of violence, but not less problematic than the other one.

The distinction between a "pure" act of force and an act of violence, in this case, is based on the fact that the violent act is an illegitimate, unauthorized, or unlawful use of force. There is no difference, then, in terms of the specific *kind* of act: what makes an act violent is the way it is performed, the subject performing it, and the circumstances of its performance. Consider, for example, the act of hitting someone with a stick. If the subject performing the act is a police officer who is exercising physical force on a criminal, then according to this definition the act

[4] Some people believe that an important aspect characterizing a violent act is the "attitude" with which the act is performed. Audi refers to cases in which the violent "attitude" is absent in order to emphasize the importance of a violent "disposition" or "attitude" and asks whether they should qualify as violent: "Murder […] is a clear case of violence if carried out by drubbing, but at best a borderline case if carried out by calm and unresisted poisoning resulting in rapid, fearless, and painless death" ("On the Meaning and Justification of Violence," 52). He thus includes the adverb "vigorously" in his definition of a violent physical act to stress the importance of this qualitative element. This seems problematic, as it introduces a subjective aspect for evaluation; in addition, there seems to be an underlying confusion between the noun "violence" and the adverb "violently," where the latter would seem to indicate a particularly aggressive, strong, rough, destructive *quality* of the agent's attitude or disposition – as opposed to the former, a phenomenon which may be defined independently of any consideration concerning the subject performing it (especially if the performance of the act is disjoined from a specific subject, as we will see in the case of structural violence).

would *not* be an act of violence, but an act of (legitimate) force. However, if the same act is performed by a regular citizen, it would count as an act of violence – at least within what we may call a "legitimist" account of violence.[5]

The idea of a "legitimate" use of force – or of violence, for that matter – is extremely problematic insofar as it might require a further justificatory step. More specifically, it might be objected that the authority of the state to use force against its citizens needs to be justified, in turn (unless one is ready to endorse some form of authoritarianism): if one does not accept such authority, then the legitimacy of the actions of governmental officers would only be imposed, and the whole distinction between legitimate and illegitimate use of force would fall apart.[6] The notion of "legitimate use of force," therefore, seems too problematic to constitute a criterion for the distinction between violent and non-violent acts. The same holds for the characterization of an act in terms of the "unlawful use of force," because this would also require a further addition to the argument in order to explain how the lawfulness of an act of force would make it different from the same kind of act performed under different circumstances.

The notion of consent, finally, does not seem to help making things clear either. If a person gives his consent to being beaten up, does the resulting act count as a non-violent act? But, most importantly: what are the conditions under which someone's consent can be considered valid? What happens if that person has been manipulated, and therefore has given consent as a consequence of being persuaded that a certain thing is best for them, when that is not the case?

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[5] The physicalist and the legitimist accounts can be *distinct* accounts of violence, as they focus on two different aspects of violence: the physicalist account focuses on the structure of the act, whereas the legitimist account focuses on the position occupied by the agent within the socio-political context. It seems, however, that a physicalist kind of definition would *need* some version of the legitimacy criterion in order to say why certain acts count as violent and others do not.

[6] See for example Wolff, who brings this point to an extreme: "There are no legitimate governments, hence no special rights attaching to soldiers, policemen, magistrates, or other law-enforcement agents, hence no coherent distinction between violence and the legitimate use of force." R. P. Wolff, "On Violence," *The Journal of Philosophy* 66, (1969), no. 19: 601–16, here 609.

Catherine MacKinnon's discussion of women's consent to sex, in this sense, is illuminating: she claims that in a context characterized by a fundamental inequality of power and by constraint, women cannot *actually* consent to sex, because they are not in the position of free, autonomous subjects, but are by default immersed in a context of oppression, which deprives them of the very possibility of formulating and expressing consent.[7] This is an example of how the notion of consent is immensely problematic and this not an adequate one if it is to constitute a criterion for distinguishing acts of violence from other kinds of acts.

The physical act being equal, then, it is hard to draw a clear conceptual distinction between a violent act and a merely forceful one, and therefore between a surgeon and a serial killer or between a police officer and a criminal – at least by referring to the physicalist model. This model, however, has further problems. Some of these have to do with the fact that not even the definition of the violent physical act, which would seem to be the easiest part of the task, is clear and unproblematic. In some cases, indeed, it seems that this account, whose advantage – according to its proponents – is its supposed ability to reflect and account for our everyday, direct, immediate experience of violence and our intuitions about it, fails exactly at capturing our lived experience. In order to clarify some of these issues, let us examine some further aspects of physical violence, more specifically concerning some of the ways in which we perceive that the integrity of our body is being violated. One feature that seems to be taken for granted by the minimalist accounts of violence is that physical contact between the body (or a weapon, considered as an extension of the body) of the person who exercises the violence and the body of

[7] See C. A. MacKinnon, "Rape: On Coercion and Consent," in Ead., *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1989, 171-183: "The law of rape presents consent as free exercise of sexual choice under condition of equality of power without exposing the underlying structure of constraint and disparity. Fundamentally, desirability to men is supposed a woman's form of power because she can both arouse it and deny its fulfillment. To woman is attributed both the cause of man's initiative and the denial of his satisfaction. This rationalizes force. Consent in this model becomes more a metaphysical quality of a woman's being than a choice she makes and communicates. Exercise of women's so-called power presupposes more fundamental social powerlessness." (175)

the person who receives it is necessary: in other words, it seems necessary that the two bodies directly and materially interact in order for the injury or damage to take place. However, it seems that there could be many instances of injury even in absence of physical contact: in these instances, we can see that the law itself punishes the agent, thereby considering them as instances of aggression.

One example in this sense is the distinction between the notions of assault and battery. Often, in the legal context, the two charges are filed together: when a person is charged with battery, we can typically assume they will also be charged with assault. The latter, however, may be – and in fact often is – charged independently. "Assault" occurs when one threatens to commit a crime upon another, with the ability to follow through with the threat. The California assault law, Penal Code 240, defines assault as "an unlawful attempt, coupled with a present ability, to commit a violent injury on the person of another."[8] In order for a person to be charged with assault, the following conditions must obtain: (1) X did something that was likely to result in the use of force against Y; (2) X did so willfully; (3) X was aware of facts that would lead a reasonable person to *believe* that this act would directly and probably result in force being applied to the other person; and (4) when X acted, s/he had the *ability* to apply force to the other person.[9] What is most interesting for our present purposes is that the mere attempt (or threat) to commit a violent act, and not the actually performed violent act, is sufficient in order to charge someone with assault. It would seem, then, that the attempt to cause injury or damage to another person corresponds to causing (some form of) injury and thus fall under the definition of violence proposed by physicalist accounts. In addition, emphasis is placed on the *belief* that the attempt or threat will actually develop into an action and therefore cause actual physical harm.

[8] Penal Code 240 PC, cited in Shouse California Law Group, "California Assault Law - Penal Code 240 PC," http://www.shouselaw.com/assault.html (retrieved on April 20, 2015).
[9] Ibid., italics mine.

Such belief is a sufficient condition for the occurrence of *harm* and therefore for the punishment of the agent.[10] It is worth noticing, moreover, that in the same context the definition of "application of force" is itself quite loose and covers *any* harmful or offensive touching. Let us not forget that this touching does not need to actually occur in order for assault to take place: it is enough for it to be concretely or reasonably *possible*.

This example suggests that an *actual* bodily injury may not be necessary in order for violence to occur: the law itself recognizes these less tangible forms as violations of someone's bodily integrity. The actual causing of injury corresponds to a specific, separate charge, that is battery. The fact that the law considers the threat or the attempt to inflict injury as punishable seems indicative of a significance of the body that is recognized even beyond its immediate materiality. In other words, it seems that not only what concerns the body as regarded within its boundaries (the skin, for example), but also what lies beyond those boundaries can be considered as (1) pertinent to the body, and therefore (2) worthy of a particular form of respect and protection. This constitutes a further reason to question the adequacy of the physicalist model and its exclusive focus on the body, and a particularly strong one, insofar as it highlights the difficulty of defining precisely what *counts as* the body, what is included in the definition, and what is left out.

In this sense, it may be useful to think about another example of the way in which the body somehow *extends* itself beyond its mere materiality, namely the fact that, underlying our behavior, there is the belief that there is an *appropriate physical distance* we should keep from one another in our daily interactions. Most of the times this belief is unconscious and we simply enact it without realizing it. However, we seem to realize it very clearly when we experience an

[10] Penalties include a fine and/or jail time up to six months.

interaction with someone with a different idea of what an "appropriate distance" should be, whether we feel that the other person is cold and detached or overly friendly and effusive. Each culture has a different idea of what this appropriate distance is, and there is a specific discipline concerned with this: proxemics is the study of this aspect of human interactions, considered as a subset of nonverbal communication.[11] The crucial idea, here, is that there is a *space or area of pertinence* for each individual, which extends beyond the merely physical boundaries of her body; this area is considered an integral part of the individual, no less than their body itself, and therefore is regarded as a protected, inviolable space. If this space is entered by someone who is not close to the individual, and therefore not allowed or expected to do so, such entering is experienced as an invasion, as a violation that is not *qualitatively* different from a strictly physical aggression.

This point deserves some attention, or at least some provisional considerations: while it would be premature to draw any conclusions at this stage, it is worth noting that an important aspect of the problem is emerging, namely the aspect of the *quality* of the violent act as opposed to the *material* component of its manifestation, its means, its intensity. One of the main goals of this chapter is to elucidate this distinction and show that an adequate account of violence needs to include it. While it may seem natural to focus on the material component of violent acts – and, in fact, this is what many people do, thereby running the risk of overlooking or not even seeing more subtle forms of violence – I believe it is important to reflect on the qualitative aspect of violence, on the specific conceptual features that make an act *violent*. In this sense, we should ask what are the common features (if any) of the kind of violation of bodily integrity that takes place when we hit somebody with a punch and the kind of violation that takes place when we

[11] See for example E. T. Hall, "A System for the Notation of Proxemic Behavior." *American Anthropologist* 65 (1963), no. 5: 1003–1026. Hall was the founder of the discipline and he first coined the term.

enter somebody's personal space without their consent, or when we approach a person with an aggressive attitude: these features will tell us something important about the nature of violence. Some of them will emerge in the course of this chapter, but for now let us discuss two further, often interrelated aspects of the physicalist account that show that its reliance on the body is conceptually problematic. The first has to do with the temporality of the violent act, while the second concerns psychological violence, a form of violence that many versions of the physicalist model seem to accept, but that opens up the way to the inclusion of many other forms of violence and therefore to the definitive abandonment of the physicalist model.

2. *Body and Psyche*

One further, important limitation of the strictly physical definition of violence is that it has a hard time accounting for cases in which an aggression performed at some moment can cause injury or damage at some later moment: in the same way as this definition cannot account for forms of violence that do not involve proximity (or contact) in space, it cannot account for forms of violence that do not involve proximity in time. How do we account for cases in which the *injury*, a key constituent of physicalist definitions of violence, manifests at a later time (with respect to the performance of the act causing it) in the form of psycho-somatic disorders or neuroses? Should we understand the scope of violence as restricted to the space and time of the occurrence of a material act and its material consequences? These questions lead us to the discussion of a particular kind of violence, namely psychological violence. One would expect physicalist definitions to only recognize material means in the performance of a violent act, and equally material consequences on the receiving end. However, many physicalist accounts seem

to admit an extremely significant (and broad) set of cases that challenge the conceptual basis of this theoretical approach.

Generally speaking, psychological violence may be characterized as the exercise of emotional or psychological abuse resulting in another person's suffering. However, the definition of psychological violence, as well as its distinction from physical violence, is a difficult task. It seems that psychological violence and physical violence may be distinguished along three dimensions: the target or object of the violent act (the psyche vs. the body), the means through which violence is exercised (e.g. verbal abuse vs. physical aggression), and the consequences produced by the two kinds of violence (e.g. sense of humiliation and anxiety vs. bruises or broken bones). In reality, however, these phenomena and their consequences are not so easily distinguishable: psychological violence, and more specifically the *act* of exercising it, can have both psychological and physical consequences. The same holds for physical violence, which may accompany or be accompanied by psychological violence and have consequences at either or both the physical and the psychological level. As a matter of fact, subjects exposed to one type of violence tend to experience the other kind as well, especially when the violence takes place within the family or in the context of intimate relationships.[12] This aspect will become important, in general, for the theory of violence I will defend, which regards violence as a much more pervasive phenomenon than a focus on isolated acts or events, typical especially of physicalist theories, might suggest. What we tend to understand as individual acts of violence are actually only specific components of an interrelated system of violence characterizing the very structure of human interactions and activities.

[12] As we will see in Chapter Two, the same holds for structural violence: individuals exposed to structural violence are also statistically more exposed to physical and psychological violence. This fact seems to suggest that violence is a pervasive phenomenon, one that *informs* human life extensively and in many interconnected ways. Therefore, while it is possible to conceptually distinguish forms or kinds of violence, the phenomenon "violence" seems to be a complex, multi-layered phenomenon that needs to be analyzed and understood as a whole.

The complexity and interrelatedness of psychological and physical violence has led most physicalist theorists of violence to recognize psychological violence as an actual form of violence and not as something we might describe as violence just by "extension" or analogy. C.A.J. Coady, for example, while arguing for a strictly physicalist definition of violence, concedes that there is a case for including psychological violence in his account in a non-metaphorical, proper sense: in his view, psychological violence can be regarded as "involving the application of force," and therefore as consistent with the characterization of physical violence he offers.[13] Of course, force is not exercised through and on the body, in this case: according to Coady, there is a specific kind of force at play in acts of psychological violence, which he calls *overpowering*, i.e. subduing or subjecting another person. The reason why most minimalist theorists of violence tend to include this form of violence in their account seems to be that psychological violence displays the same conceptual structure as physical violence: "if we consider a case in which someone skillfully works upon another's emotions and fears with a combination of words and deeds short of physical force, but with intentionally overpowering effects, then we may well feel that this is close enough to the physical model to be a case of violence."[14] It is important, according to Coady, to focus on this structure rather than on other features of psychological violence, such as deprivation of autonomy or other "impalpable" factors. The reason why it is so important for him to stress this point is that he wants to avoid a common tendency in the literature on violence, i.e. the tendency to "slide" from psychological violence to structural violence. Such tendency, in his view, is the result of a conceptual confusion arising from the idea that psychological violence and its consequences are thought to be "impalpable": from there, the move to admitting "the even more impalpable structural violence"

[13] Coady, "The Idea of Violence," 15.
[14] Ibid., pp. 15-16.

would be quick. On the contrary, Coady wants us to keep the two ideas separate and to *not* view forms of social inequality as violence, as that would render the notion of violence too broad and therefore confusing, politically unhelpful, and morally loaded,[15] whereas he wants to advocate for a *neutral* definition of violence and keep ethical considerations out of the definition itself. I will discuss this line of criticism of the structural view in the next chapter. What is worth noticing for the purposes of the present discussion is that Coady acknowledges that the nature and the consequences of psychological violence are, in fact, palpable. But what does the term "palpable" mean, for him, when used to describe cases of psychological violence? His own words can help us understand this point. In order to illustrate his idea, he says that psychological violence occurs, for example, "when a parent cruelly humiliates a vulnerable child to the point of collapse or great distress." "Cruel humiliation," "collapse," and "great distress" can then be considered as key components of psychological violence. In fact, it seems that these aspects may well pertain to physical violence as well, and that they may also include, turn into, or cause physical consequences. As is well known, and as research shows, the effects of psychological violence do in fact include a variety of physical phenomena, ranging from sleep disturbances to frequent headaches and chronic pain, all the way to suicidal tendencies.[16] These "palpable" effects illustrate the point made above, namely that it is quite difficult to distinguish instances of physical and psychological violence in a clear manner.

The very term "palpable," in turn, is extremely vague: this makes Coady's account problematic – and importantly so, since "palpable" is the notion he employs in order to avoid a further broadening of the concept of violence as to include forms of structural or institutional

[15] See Coady, "Violence."
[16] These are some of the effects of psychological aggression listed by the American Psychological Association. See American Psychological Association, *Intimate Partner Aggression: Facts and Resources. Forms of Psychological Oppression*. http://www.apa.org/topics/violence/partner.aspx (retrieved on April 12, 2015).

violence. According to him, structural violence does *not* have palpable effects and therefore should not be described as a proper form of violence. In order to see the weakness of this argument, let us go back and analyze the notion and nature of psychological violence and its phenomenology so that we can understand how it works and how pervasive it is. This will help us understand why the distinction between "palpable" and "impalpable" forms of violence is extremely weak and does not account for the distinction between forms of violence Coady (and others along with him) would like to make.

A particularly illuminating example of psychological violence is the phenomenon called "gaslighting." The term comes from "Gaslight," a movie adapted from a play by Patrick Hamilton, available in the original 1940 British version and in the American remake starring Ingrid Bergman, Charles Boyer, and Joseph Cotten. The plot is such a clear illustration of one of the major forms of psychological violence that "gaslighting" has become the ordinary term used to designate this specific kind of psychological abuse. In the American version, Ingrid Bergman is Paula, the niece of Alice Alquist, a world-famous opera singer who has been strangled in her own house, in London. The murderer escaped the crime scene without the jewels he was looking for, and has never been caught. Paula had been raised by and lived with her aunt after her mother died during childbirth. The night of the murder, she woke up and interrupted the murderer's search for the jewels. Following Alice's death, she is sent to Italy where she is trained to become an opera singer by her aunt's old teacher. There, she falls in love with Gregory, a fascinating older man, and they get married. He persuades her to move back to London and to live in the house where she once lived with her aunt. As soon as they move in, strange things start to happen and their relationship slowly turns into something very different from the passionate and tender interactions they used to have at the beginning. Gregory starts isolating her from other

people and immediately "informs" the two women working for them – a cook and a housekeeper – that Paula is a "highly strung" person. Gregory's psychological manipulation is subtle and systematic, and its intensity increases with time: he starts by pointing out qualities that Paula does not recognize in herself, such as having a tendency to forget or lose things. At the same time, he hides things from her in order to confuse her and to insinuate in her the idea that he is right, after all, and that something is wrong with her. When she shows resistance and questions him – which she does less and less as his strategy starts succeeding and she gets in his psychological trap – he reacts in apparently innocent and surprised ways ("Are you becoming suspicious, as well as absent-minded, Paula?") that undermine her self-confidence, making her feel more and more confused and uncertain about her own ability to evaluate the situation. In one scene, Gregory has a flirty conversation with Nancy, their young housekeeper, in front of Paula. During this conversation he diminishes Paula by complimenting Nancy and telling her she should give some advice to Paula in order to help her improve her complexion. When Paula complains about his behavior, he replies that he has done it to please her, since she wanted the both of them to treat their housekeeper and cook as equals. He thus makes her discomfort appear as her own problem, something for which he is not only not responsible, but unjustly blamed. Another example of this strategy is that Gregory alternates oppressive and kind gestures, always withdrawing the latter ones due to something Paula has allegedly done. Gregory's strategy, and the gaslighting strategy in general, starts from creating an uncomfortable environment for Paula, isolating her so that she is deprived of the ability to talk with other people and to be presented with alternative views on what is happening. Once her isolation is secured, he manipulates Paula into believing she is going mad. She actually risks losing her mind, among other reasons, because the narrative about her own personality that Gregory presents to her conflicts with the

narrative she has of herself: she thus becomes persuaded that she has indeed lost her mind and that she is no longer able to adequately evaluate herself and the events happening in her life. When a Scotland Yard inspector, who is still investigating Alice Alquist's murder, understands what is happening and finally manages to talk to Paula and tell her the truth, Gregory's manipulation strategy falls apart, and Paula finally understands she has been deceived. Gregory is actually Alice's murder, who wanted to gain access to the house in order to find the jewels he intended to steal when he killed Alice. He waited for Paula to grow up, married her, and tried to drive her mad in order to have her institutionalized and be able to look for the jewels in the house.

Although there are two important differences between Gregory's character and actual gaslighters – first, the perpetrator does not consciously aim at driving the victim crazy, and second, there is no clear goal that gaslighting is consciously aimed at[17] – the movie is an outstanding representation of some of the characteristic ways through which psychological violence is exercised on its victims: the perpetrator gets the victim to trust them and then isolates her from her social context. Then he ensures she starts questioning her clarity of mind and her emotional and mental health. Eventually, the victim is no longer able to trust her memory, perception, and judgment. The trope of the house/home plays a key role in the narrative as a metaphor for a place that is supposed to be a safe haven (physically and emotionally) but turns into a terrifying trap. And if *home* is no longer available as a safe haven, one has nowhere to go – which is what is most frightening about gaslighting, where "home" is usually represented by a partner, a family member, someone who the victim would trust and rely on. Freud described the

[17] See K. Abramson. "Turning up the Lights on Gaslighting." *Philosophical Perspectives* 28 (2014), no. 1: 1–30. Abramson defines gaslighting as "a form of emotional manipulation in which the gaslighter tries (consciously or not) to induce in someone the sense that her reactions, perceptions, memories and/or beliefs are not just mistaken, but utterly without grounds – paradigmatically, so unfounded as to qualify as crazy. Gaslighting is, even at this level, quite unlike merely dismissing someone, for dismissal simply fails to take another seriously as an interlocutor, whereas gaslighting is aimed at getting another not to take herself seriously as an interlocutor." (ibid., 2)

sense of profound perturbation corresponding to the loss of this kind of certainty in his essay *Das Unhemliche*, in English "The Uncanny."[18] We feel something is uncanny, for example, when the feeling that something is familiar and reassuring is mixed with the opposite feeling, or when we cannot clearly distinguish real events from fantastic ones. This creates what the contemporary psychological literature designates as cognitive dissonance, the sense of psychological discomfort or stress arising in a person who holds inconsistent or conflicting beliefs, ideas, or values.[19]

The effects of this kind of violence, as I mentioned above, may not necessarily include an *immediately* observable physical injury, but they are serious enough to fall under the "palpability" criterion proposed by Coady. The victim of psychological violence loses her confidence in her memory, perception, and judgment, and therefore her sense of what is real and unreal, right and wrong regarding herself and the events in her life. This is a highly disruptive set of effects with respect to one's capacity to live a normal life and to be a functional individual, and causes serious psycho-somatic consequences. It would be hard to deny that these consequences are "palpable." But what does it mean for something to be "palpable"? Literally, something is palpable if it can be "touched or felt," if it can be perceived. We may say, then, that psychological violence in this sense can be understood as an actual form of violence because its consequences can be *perceived* by a reasonably attentive observer. The example of gaslighting, as other kinds of psychological violence described by the literature, is a clear example of violence whose consequences can be observed by an outside person.

[18] See S. Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, 217-256.
[19] The theory of cognitive dissonance was first developed by Leon Festinger in the 1950s. See *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford University Press: Stanford University Press, 1957.

There is an aspect, however, that makes Coady's resort to this criterion problematic, especially since it is supposed to ensure a clear distinction between psychological violence and other forms of violence, like the one associated with (or constituted by) deep social and economic inequalities determined by sexism and racism – just to name a couple – and therefore with the oppression of specific groups of people within our societies. The impossibility to freely live one's life and fully develop its potential, when determined by causes that pertain to the political, social, and economic system is regarded as a form of violence by several authors, who call it "structural," "institutional," "systemic," or "objective" violence. This form of violence, which I will extensively discuss in the next chapter, is usually accompanied by physical violence (violence against women and police brutality against black people being chief examples of this) and by psychological violence (for example, persuading certain groups of people, whether explicitly or implicitly, that they are inferior by nature), and has definitely palpable consequences which can be described in terms that parallel those used to describe the other, more easily recognized forms of violence. Coady's observation that there is a slippery slope leading from the concept of psychological violence to the concept of structural violence, then, seems false: there is no "slope," but rather a much stronger conceptual necessity. If we return to the consideration of the key constituents of psychological violence as defined by Coady ("cruel humiliation," "collapse," and "great distress"), we can see that such elements can be also be identified as key constituents of a specific kind of "action," which is not easily associated with a specific, individual agent and with a specific, individual act, but can be explained as the interaction of a complex system of social, political, and economic inequalities to which individuals can be subjected. This is, roughly, the definition of structural violence, which – as I

hope will become clear in the next chapter – generates the same kind of effects (and even more severe ones, to the point of dehumanization) on the individuals targeted by it.

3. *The Non-Neutrality of the Physicalist Definition*

The problem of psychological violence constitutes only the last one of a series of issues for a restrictive account of violence and, in particular, for one of its alleged advantages, namely the fact that it should be a clear, simple, and unambiguous definition, which should help clarifying a debate that is complex, but often also confused, according to some people, due to the attempt to include in this concept less visible and less explicit forms of violence. As I hope I showed above, the restricted view of violence – its intentions notwithstanding – is in fact ambiguous and not at all a straightforward one: in particular, I showed that this definition cannot effectively distinguish an act "simply" causing injury from an act of violence unless it introduces the notion of legitimacy, thereby defining violence as the illegitimate use of force. In this case, however, a further problem arises, namely that of justifying the distinction between what counts as a legitimate use of force and what does not. In addition, since this definition focuses on the violation of the integrity of the body, when we analyze this concept we find out that it is all but clear: to begin with, as the distinction between assault and battery demonstrates, physical contact is not always necessary in order for an act to be defined as violent and to be treated accordingly. In the same way, proxemics shows that all cultures recognize an "area of pertinence" of the body that is considered as part of the body itself, and therefore as pertaining to the individual itself. In order for such area to be violated, and therefore in order to regard the act of invading it as an act of aggression, no physical contact – again – is necessary.

The physicalist view of violence, therefore, offers an apparently clear definition of the phenomenon which soon reveals its illusory character. The second advantage of this kind of account is that it is (allegedly) a morally neutral one. According to some of its proponents, indeed, this definition is located on a plane that precedes or simply *differs* from the plane of moral theory and of political evaluations. For example, Coady believes that since most proponents of the theory of structural violence are left-wing intellectuals, their definition is affected by their political views, making them lean towards a moral condemnation of all forms of violence. The proponents of the aggression-based model, on the other hand, claim to want to defend a "neutral" definition in order to make room, subsequently, not only for negative evaluations of violence, but also for positive evaluations, for example in cases in which violence is exercised on a criminal in order to prevent him from injuring or killing someone.

The physicalist model fails to display this kind of advantage as well. To begin with, it fails to do so at the conceptual level: in order to ensure the possibility of judging the same kind of act as violent or not violent it is necessary to introduce the notion of legitimacy, and as we saw above this is a further problematic question. In particular, the introduction of the legitimacy criterion amounts, as a matter of fact, to the introduction of a moral and political point that needs, in turn, to be addressed at a deeper level. In addition, this way of approaching the issue only shifts the problem of the moral evaluation – that is, the justificatory work – to a subsequent stage, where we will actually need to think about violence in morally non-neutral terms. It seems, then, that this view of violence forces us to a form of circular reasoning: in this case, one supports a physicalist, and therefore narrow definition and excludes some phenomena from the set of the cases of violence, in order to be able to formulate moral judgments on a restricted set of cases, with respect to which it has already been decided which ones are to be condemned and which

ones are not. In other words, it seems that the moral and political evaluation is always already there, and actually is what guides this kind of theory, as opposed to being justified from within the theory itself.

In the context of the properly political evaluation, then, the problem is even more striking. Politically neutral stances, in fact, often end up serving conservative positions precisely on the basis of what they refuse to take into account. The debate on the nature of violence is a paradigmatic example of this dynamic. The "morally neutral" or "conventional" definition of the concept hides an ideological use of the term, which, on the contrary, needs to be unveiled. If one rejects broad accounts of violence, she is thereby refusing to include a whole set of phenomena including racism, sexism, poverty, etc. This could be conceptually fine, except that what then counts as violence, in the political arena, is only – for example – the (sometimes) violent reaction of the oppressed against the oppressor. If the *status quo* is not violent, then only what *disrupts* it counts as violent, and is therefore condemned. It should seem clear, at this point, that restricted and allegedly neutral accounts of violence tend to be functional to the defense of the *status quo* – and thus, quite literally, politically conservative. That seem to be at least a problematic consequence, given the moral weight that, *pace* Coady and the proponents of "neutral" accounts of violence, the term carries.

Before I conclude this chapter, a clarification is in order. It might seem that what is at stake is "only" the meaning of a term – in this case, violence – and that the debate could be settled by simply agreeing on how to use words. How we use words and what words we use, however, is not simply a matter of convention, with the assumption that what convention we actually choose to apply or agree on will not make any difference with respect to the "substance" of the problem. The way we describe facts and events does make a difference, and an important one, to how

those facts and events are processed and evaluated in an ethical and political sense. I mentioned above that the risk implicit in refusing to acknowledge structural violence as an actual form of violence and to limit our use of the term only to physical (and psychological) violence is that of accepting and justifying the *status quo* – whether it is a just or unjust one – and condemning whatever act disrupts it, regardless of whether the act itself is justified or maybe even right.

The Baltimore riots of April and May 2015 are an example of this issue concerning the narrative we build of events: if we understand what happened in Baltimore merely as a set of individual acts of (physical) violence emerging out of an otherwise neutral (or even just) social and political context, then our judgment cannot but be one of straight condemnation of the riots as mere hooliganism. Now imagine we have a different notion of violence: if we take into account the background of structural violence informing and in some sense *creating the conditions for* those acts of physical violence to occur, then judging those events becomes a much more complex task. We need to consider whether isolating certain events and ignoring the context producing them is an epistemologically honest operation or an ideological one.

Fighting for the right meaning of a term, then, is not simply a matter of semantics, but a crucial philosophical, ethical, and political task. The way we talk about things affects the way we think about them, and the way we think about things is crucial in determining the way we act with respect to them. The work I am trying to do here, and that I will keep doing in the following chapters, then, is to be understood in these terms.

A different solution than the physicalist account of violence is attempted by several authors who, in sometimes very different ways, argue for a broader understanding of violence, as it is exercised through institutions, power structures, social injustice, and other factors. In the next chapter I present the main tenets of this kind of account and discuss its advantages and

limitations with the purposes of further complicating and enriching our understanding of violence.

CHAPTER TWO

Structural Violence

1. *Introduction*

In Chapter One I have explored the most minimal definition of violence. The physicalist account, as I proposed to call it, restricts the application of the term to individual, physical acts of force exercised on the body of another so as to inflict harm and/or injury. As I argued, this view is inadequate, as it fails to account for a broad range of cases that are described in terms of, or treated as, forms of violence or violation, and yet cannot be explained by reference to the body alone. The body, in fact, is just *one* site among others where violence is performed. Physical violence, accordingly, may be viewed as the extreme, most superficial, and most visible manifestation of a much broader violent dimension that informs the very structure of human life. Defenders of minimalist views of violence express resistance against this broader perspective, arguing that it makes the concept of violence, its definition, and its application confusing, ambiguous, and ultimately unhelpful. However, I believe that since the phenomenon we are analyzing is itself complex, such complexity should not be viewed as a shortcoming of the account that makes sense of it or as a reason to oversimplify such account. On the contrary, I believe that a good theory of violence, once the latter is understood as a complex phenomenon, should reflect and do justice to that complexity and not rely on a simplistic definition that may fail to capture it while reassuring us at the conceptual level. My aim, thus, is to build a comprehensive account of violence by gradually adding to, and complicating, the starting point constituted by the minimal, physicalist account.

In what follows, I explore a family of theories of violence that expand beyond the limits of physical aggression and take into account those aspects of violence that are apparently more

abstract or vague and therefore difficult to pinpoint. I use the expression "family of theories" to refer to a diverse set of theories and views that describe the impact of unjust social structures on individual lives as violence. The concept of structural violence is used in a variety of contexts and disciplines, including (but not limited to) anthropology, peace and conflict studies, feminist theory, and critical race theory. It should not be surprising, then, that there is no single definition for this kind of violence. In most cases, however, the notions of harm and/or injury seem to play a central role. Paul Farmer, for example, defines it as follows:

> The term "structural violence" is one way of describing social arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm's way. The arrangements are *structural* because they are embedded in the political and economic organization of our social world; they are *violent* because they cause injury to people (typically, not those responsible for perpetuating such inequalities).[1]

Structural violence is thus defined by reference to the injury/harm caused by "social arrangements" – in particular, the political and economic arrangements of our societies – to individual lives and to the lives of entire populations. Examples of structural violence are the unavailability or inaccessibility of basic resources and social services (for example: water, food, health care, education) and the discrimination or oppression based on one's membership in a particular group determined by race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, nationality, religion, political creed, etc.

The physicalist and the structural views of violence differ in important ways, which will become clear in the course of this chapter. Two basic conceptual differences, in particular, can be highlighted from the start. The first difference is that while the physicalist account of violence is based on the idea that we can identify a specific act, and thus a specific agent performing it and a

[1] P. Farmer et al., "Structural Violence and Clinical Medicine," *PLoS Med* 3, (2006), no. 10, 1686-1691, here 1686. See also Id., "On Suffering and Structural Violence: A View from Below." *Daedalus* 125 (1996), no. 1: 261–83; and "An Anthropology of Structural Violence," *Current Anthropology* 45, (2004), no. 3, 305–25.

subject receiving it, the structural account proposes that we extend the meaning of the concept of violence so as to include the *matrix* of social, political, and economic factors that creates and perpetuates inequality and human suffering. In the latter case, obviously, the identification of an individual act and of an individual agent is a much harder operation than it is in cases of physical violence, since it requires an elaborate analysis of the structures producing inequality and human suffering in order to understand who and/or what is doing the violence and in what ways. The absence of a "spectacular" violent act and of an individual agent performing it often make structural violence hardly recognizable or altogether invisible. Being aware of this feature is crucial to becoming able to identify manifestations of violence that are as important as, if not even more than, physical violence.

The second difference between physical and structural violence concerns their temporal dimension: when we examine structural violence we cannot point at a specific moment in time in which it "took place." Structural violence can certainly be explained by referring to historical moments that have played a particular role in the formation of the matrix of social, political, and economic factors which constitute it, but at the same time it usually extends over a prolonged *period* of time rather than taking place at a specific *moment* in time.

To be sure, recognizing structural forms of violence and emphasizing their importance does not mean that we should minimize the role or the impact of physical violence: as a matter of fact, research shows that individuals subjected to structural violence are also more exposed to physical violence than others. Often, structural violence itself requires physical violence, among other means, in order to be established and perpetuated: violence against women in its various forms and police brutality are typical examples of this conjunction. In addition, victims of

physical violence (e.g. armed conflicts) are more exposed to structural violence.[2] My aim here is not to choose one account or definition of violence among others, but – as I mentioned above – to build a view of violence that expands and complicates the initial, minimal definition.

2. *Theories of Structural Violence*

I previously referred to a family of theories because of the great variety of approaches we can find in the field. Correspondingly, we can find that there are different names for this kind of violence, which some authors call structural, some call objective and/or systemic, some others institutional.[3] The term "objective" violence, for example, is proposed in opposition to "subjective" violence, where the latter refers to physical acts of violence. It emphasizes the lack of a clearly identifiable agent (thus its anonymous character) and, relatedly, that this kind of violence constitutes the very framework or background in which agents live and move about, rather than an individual act standing against an otherwise neutral background. The term "institutional violence" highlights, quite obviously, the role of social and political institutions in creating inequality and human suffering. One problem with the latter term, however, is that not all forms of violence which this account aims to capture can be unequivocally attributed to specific institutions: in many cases, for example, inequality and human suffering are caused by an interaction of formal institutions and socio-cultural or historical factors, and the exclusive focus on institutions may prevent us from understanding the role and impact of the latter. In the

[2] See for example D. Du Nann Winter, D. C. Leighton, "Structural Violence: Introduction," in D. J. Christie, R. V. Wagner, D. Du Nann Winter (eds.), *Peace, Conflict and Violence: Peace Psychology for the 21st Century*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall 2001, 99.

[3] On institutional violence, see D. W. Curtin and R. Litke (eds.), *Institutional Violence*, Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi 1999. Newton Garver defines violence in terms of the violation of rights, and distinguishes physical and institutional violence. These two forms of violence, in turn, can be overt or covert. See N. Garver, "What Violence Is." In Bufacchi, V. (Ed.). *Violence: A Philosophical Anthology*: 170-182.

present context I prefer to use the term "structural violence" as it does not limit the scope of the analysis to a specific factor or element, but rather points at a set of interrelated elements.

Theories of structural violence can be distinguished on the basis of their focus, that is, on the element(s) of the structure they consider as the primary cause of harm: in what follows, I discuss theories that focus, respectively, on neoliberal capitalism, gender, and race in order to analyze their understanding of the notion of structural violence and to determine the content of such notion in detail.

2.1 *Structural Violence and Neoliberal Capitalism*

In some cases, theories of structural violence look at the economic system as the primary cause of the violence individual lives suffer in our society: this is the approach that mainly (but not necessarily) Marxist authors in particular tend to follow.[4] Slavoj Žižek, for example, has developed a theory of violence that emphasizes both the role of language and the role of neoliberal capitalism in producing what he calls "objective" violence in contrast to "subjective" violence, that is, physical violence. In particular, Žižek's notion of objective violence emphasizes its invisibility with respect to subjective violence, which receives most of the attention in public discussions and in the political arena. Subjective violence is spectacular and can easily divert our attention from what underlies it, that is, the very framework of our life, a dimension which we take to be *neutral*, and against which we measure individual acts of physical violence. Once we fully take into account the role of such framework, however, physical acts of violence may be seen as secondary or derivative with respect to structural violence, thereby entirely reshaping our

[4] This view can be found, for example, in J. Harris, *Violence and Responsibility*, London; Boston: Routledge & K. Paul 1980; T. Honderich, *Violence for Equality: Inquiries in Political Philosophy*, London; New York: Routledge 1989; S. Lee, "Poverty and Violence," *Social Theory and Practice* 22 (1996), no. 1: 67–82.

way of thinking about violence. In his book on violence, he introduces this point through a powerful image:

> There is an old story about a worker suspected of stealing: every evening, as he leaves the factory, the wheelbarrow he rolls in front of him is carefully inspected. The guards can find nothing. It is always empty. Finally, the penny drops: what the worker is stealing are the wheelbarrows themselves.[5]

The violence we can *see* and experience, the one described by the physicalist definition, tends to appear to us as a disruption of the "normal" state of things. The latter, thus, is understood as non-violent, by definition, as the "background of a non-violent zero level,"[6] with respect to which individual acts of violence emerge in their distinctive nature, a nature regarded as radically different from that background. This view of reality, which contrasts a nonviolent default with violent "exceptions" (no matter how frequent these exceptions may be), is exactly what the structural view of violence radically calls into question by claiming that the very dimension we inhabit, *the default*, is what is violent to begin with. Violence is the *container*, the wheelbarrow, not just the object(s) in that container.

Žižek emphasizes that we should resist the "fascinating lure"[7] of visible, physical violence, which seems to be the predominant concern in contemporary society: and we need to be careful not only because individual, "subjective" episodes of violence are a relatively superficial phenomenon compared to the very structure that produces them, but also because the focus on physical violence makes it difficult for us to appreciate and condemn what he calls "objective"

[5] S. Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. New York: Picador 2008, 1.
[6] Ibid., 2.
[7] Žižek, *Violence*, 1.

violence.[8] What we understand as a neutral background of "non-violent zero level" is actually permeated by objective violence, the real cause of the outbursts of subjective violence.

Objective violence encompasses two dimensions of violence as the constituting elements of the apparently neutral framework in which our actions and interactions take place. The first dimension has to do with language and is called *symbolic* violence: this is the violence inherent in language itself and especially in its "essencing ability,"[9] the act whereby it names things, determines their meaning, and assigns them an essence. The symbolic violence of language thus acts by "constructing and imposing a certain symbolic field," a universe of meaning that determines the way we understand the world, ourselves, and others.[10] Both the act of naming things and the act of constructing narratives (where the latter points at the performative, rather than the semantic, aspect of language) constitute symbolic violence insofar as they contribute to the creation and imposition of a specific understanding of the world and its dynamics. By identifying language as a fundamental vehicle of violence, Žižek distances himself from the more reassuring view that sees language as the dimension which makes it possible for humans to interact peacefully and to create a space in which reasons, instead of violence, play the major role in the constitution and functioning of the social context.[11]

A significant example of the violence done through language is provided by the terminology used in the debate about violence and the by common narrative about violence itself. Of particular interest is the very distinction between (subjective) violence and the allegedly nonviolent (objective) background:

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[8] As Brad Evans and Henry Giroux observe, "violence is easily condemned when it appears exceptional." See B. Evans, H. Giroux, *Disposable Futures. The Seduction of Violence in the Age of the Spectacle*, Monroe: City Lights Books 2015, 7.
[9] Žižek, *Violence*, 68.
[10] Ibid., 60.
[11] The two views, to be sure, need not be mutually exclusive: language can be regarded as "the house" of symbolic violence but also as providing some of the tools to address this and other forms of violence and to limit the harms they cause.

> When we perceive something as an act of violence, we measure it by a presupposed standard of what the 'normal' non-violent situation is – and the highest form of violence is the imposition of this standard with reference to which some events appear as "violent." This is why language itself, the very medium of non-violence, of mutual recognition, involves unconditional violence.[12]

Rather than a resource we can appeal to for the overcoming of violence and for peaceful communication, then, language appears as one of the major tools for the construction of the violent background we inhabit. In addition, language is functional to the most relevant form of objective violence, namely *systemic* violence, which Žižek identifies with "the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems" and thus with the social, political, and economic consequences of capitalistic domination:

> It is the self-propelling metaphysical dance of capital that runs the show, that provides the key to real-life developments and catastrophes. Therein resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism, much more uncanny than any direct pre-capitalist socio-ideological violence: this violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their "evil" intentions, but is purely "objective," systemic, anonymous.[13]

This passage clarifies one of the main differences between subjective and objective violence, and thus, also, one of the reasons why the latter is often not detected, namely that it cannot be clearly attributed to a concrete actor, but is mainly *anonymous*. As a consequence, it is not recognized as a form of violence: we tend to take it simply as "the way things are," and its harms are not regarded as the inevitable consequences of an economic system that requires exploitation and domination in order to sustain itself, but as unfortunate events that need not be understood in the broader context that produces them.[14]

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[12] Ibid., 64-65. See also S. Žižek, "Language, Violence and Non-Violence." *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 2 (2008), no. 3 : 1-12.

[13] Žižek, *Violence*, 12-13.

[14] A similar analysis has been proposed in critical discussions of antidiscrimination laws in regard to racism and other forms of discrimination and oppression. Alan Freeman, notably, describes two different approaches to the problem: he calls the first the "victim perspective," where "racial discrimination describes [the] conditions of actual social existence as a member of a perpetual underclass" and includes both the objective conditions of the victim's

If violence is not (only) the act of an evil, ill-intentioned individual, but the quality of the dimension we inhabit, do we need to modify our understanding of moral responsibility accordingly? And if so, how? Žižek answers this question by referring to the story of the anti-communist intellectuals who were expelled by the Soviet government in 1922 and travelled to Germany on a boat known as the "Philosophy Steamer." Nikolai Lossky, one of these intellectuals, expressed his incredulity in the face of that expulsion: he could not believe he was being punished without having committed any crime. After all, he had lived a peaceful life and had never hurt anyone. What he failed to realize was that what made it possible for him to enjoy a peaceful life was precisely what deprived many other people of the same privilege, subjecting them to domination and exploitation:

> [S]uch an attitude betrays a breathtaking insensitivity to the *systemic* violence that had to go on in order for such a comfortable life to be possible. We're talking here of the violence inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence.[15]

Lossky's view on his forced exile is the kind of response each of us may have when confronted with the question of our responsibility regarding the consequences of the socio-political and economic system in which we live, which we may not be directly supporting or contributing to, but that still makes our life, and the way we live it, possible. Ordinary people like Lossky – or like me – perhaps do not commit any *subjectively* evil acts in their lives, but they are often "insensitive" to – and thus, one may say, even complicit in – the *systemic* violence

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life and the consciousness associated with them. This perspective identifies the structural conditions of racism and therefore goes beyond the narrow view characterizing the "perpetrator perspective," which "sees racial discrimination not as conditions, but as actions, or series of actions, inflicted on the victim by the perpetrator. The focus is more on what particular perpetrators have done or are doing to some victims than it is on the overall life situation of the victim class." Antidiscrimination law, for Freedman, are based on the latter perspective, and thus fail to effectively address the real conditions of those who are subjected to racism and other forms of oppression. See A. D. Freeman, "Legitimizing Racial Discrimination Through Antidiscrimination Law: A Critical Review of Supreme Court Doctrine," *Minnesota Law Review* 62 (1977-1978): 1049-1119, esp. 1052 ff.

[15] Žižek, *Violence*, 9.

that enables them to live their own lives peacefully and comfortably, to pursue their own goals, and to develop their potential in the ways they find most appropriate. At whose expense, however, is that kind of life possible? Subjective violence perpetrated against people like Lossky (or me, again) may seem to come out of nowhere, Žižek observes, because the objective violence characterizing the framework of everybody's life is invisible, and most of us do not recognize it, let alone take action to address it. As I mentioned, this observation gives rise to a crucial question concerning structural violence, that is, the question concerning the scope of individual responsibility in a context so characterized. The difficulty of this question is related to the fact that structural violence is a form of violence no individual agent directly commits against others: rather, it is something in which all or most members of our society somehow seem to take part, at the very least by benefitting from the privileges it grants to the lucky ones. If a decent quality of life for some people is precisely what is made impossible by the same conditions that make it possible for some to live peacefully and comfortably, is the latter group of people morally and/or politically responsible for the life conditions of the former group? An adequate answer to this question depends on what we understand an action to be, that is, whether lack of action can be regarded as equal to action and therefore as subject to the same kind of moral evaluation.

Our common view of action identifies it with a positive, intentional movement producing some sort of change with respect to the previous state of affairs. An action, in other words, is typically conceived as a kind of *doing*, usually accompanied by a relevant intention and with some sort of aim. If we apply this definition to our discussion of violence, it seems to fit quite well with the physicalist definition, which regards violence as the active performance of an act involving someone's body and causing harm to it. Is it possible to expand our notion of action to account for what happens in structural violence? I propose to include in the concept of action

also omissions, i.e. inactivity, and therefore to include *not doing* in the sphere of the *doing*. In fact, we already consider some kinds of omissions as actions. Consider, for example, the case in which a child is drowning in a pool and needs assistance. If I do not do anything – where "anything" can range from calling 911 to actively helping the drowning child, provided that I am able to – then I can be blamed, and in some cases held responsible, for the consequences of my inactivity. This example shows that in some cases we are willing to recognize that the lack of action – not doing anything in a given situation – can be as significant, in terms of moral evaluation, as an action understood as doing something.

The concept of action, thus, includes but also extends beyond doing something intentionally, and with an aim. I propose to understand "action" not as an isolated, individual act taking place in an otherwise neutral context, as traditional moral theories often do,[16] but as an all-encompassing aspect of our existence, as a continuum which includes both *doing* and *not doing*.[17] In other words, I propose to view each moment of our life as presenting us – whether in an explicit way or not – with the need to make a choice concerning how to go about the current state of affairs: everything we do or not do in the present moment, then, should be considered as the result of a decision we make about the present moment, whether we are consciously and deliberately making that decision or not. Doing something, then, or refraining from doing something, or not doing anything at all, all count as actions. This has important repercussions on the scope of moral responsibility: according to this view, we are responsible for many more things than we would be responsible for if we limited the scope of our moral responsibility exclusively to the things we actively do.

[16] See Chapter Four.

[17] A similar view of action in the context of a definition of violence can be found in Harris' *Violence and Responsibility*. Harris distinguishes positive and negative actions. Harris believes we are equally responsible for harms that could have been prevented and for harms we directly caused.

If we now return to our discussion of structural violence, we can examine the consequences of this broad understanding of action in terms of our participation in the *structure* that does the violence. The story of Nikolai Lossky suggests that we often fail to acknowledge our role in maintaining and perpetuating the structure simply by not doing anything against it. And we do not only fail to do something against it and the injustice it produces: we also actively benefit – in terms of access to resources, health, opportunities, overall quality of life – from that injustice. This point is commonly emphasized when discussing privilege in the context of racism and sexism, among others: an ally, that is, someone who chooses to support a disadvantaged group and their struggle from his or her position of advantage, is supposed to recognize that their advantage is undeserved and, most importantly, that it stems from the disadvantage imposed on other people (for example through the discrimination or oppression of certain groups), and that consequently they have a duty to actively fight the social structures imposing that disadvantage on the group of people in question. This perspective is built on the kind of broader notions of action and moral responsibility I have discussed, and suggests what seems to be a promising way of addressing one's moral responsibility as part of a system of structural injustice or violence. Once we adopt the view of action I proposed, the question we need to ask concerns the kind of ethics that is adequate in this context.

One might say that we are not always advantaged by the very conditions that make other people disadvantaged, and conceptually this is of course possible. However, two kinds of consideration can be made here: the first is empirical, and has to do with the kind of injustice or disadvantage I am considering. In this context, I am considering the injustice caused by economic and social factors, and these kinds of injustice, especially in a globalized world, seem to make the fates of individual lives dependent on each other on a global scale. For example, the

same economic system that enables me to sit at this desk, writing these words without worrying about the basic resources for my subsistence, is the cause of someone else's struggle with those basic necessities – whether in this country or far away. Should we consider the more privileged individual *directly* responsible for this situation? Most often, this is not the case. But as a matter of fact, the other person and I share the same structural conditions, and those conditions happen to benefit me and disadvantage them. How should I consider myself and my moral standing in these circumstances? It seems implausible to think that I have *nothing* to do with the other person's situation. What I am interested in here is the fact that there is a *real* interconnectedness between the circumstances of people's lives – at the macro level, at the very least – and some consequences in terms of moral theory must follow from this fact.[18]

This leads to the second kind of consideration I want to make, namely one concerning the nature and approach of moral theory: we never act in a void. Our life *happens* every day, every minute, in a complex context made up by multiple interacting elements and agents. Moral theory, in most cases, provides us with the criteria to act right in idealized situations similar to the experimental situations scientists study in order to understand more, for example, about a biological process: many details and variables need to be left out of the experimental situation in order to isolate the specific process that is the object of study. The results of our experiment enable us to draw some general conclusions that will apply to real life to an extent that is

[18] One way to go about this issue is to compare two possible views of what it means for an agent to be the *cause* of some state of affairs. Ermanno Bencivenga, in a discussion about the justification of guilt, distinguishes two possible views. According to the first – which would correspond to the restricted notion of action as doing something – "A is a causal factor for X if, were A never to have existed, X would not have taken place." The second view holds that "My presence and action in the world has consequences for all other humans (or all other beings?); so that, were I never to have existed, their fate would have been different." This view makes room for the idea that we are always responsible (and therefore can feel guilty) for what we do, but also for what we fail to do, which in turn is rooted in the idea that there is a "universal interconnectedness," whereby all of our actions and non-actions have an effect on the whole, and therefore make a difference to the fate of all other human beings. This view will become particularly relevant when I discuss the ethical implications of my account of violence in Chapter Four. See E. Bencivenga, "The Reason for the Guilt," *Symposion* 3 (2016), no. 1: 9-10.

proportional to the variability of the actual conditions in which the mechanism takes place. Similarly, moral theory provides general, ideal criteria that help us understand the difference between a good and a bad action, or a good and a bad person or character. However, we are rarely lucky that way: we do not act in that kind of idealized, experiment-like situation. In our actual lives, we act in a pre-determined context, one that has been affected by past events, and often characterized by pre-existing conditions of injustice, so that the options we have do not include the choice of an action that is just "the right thing to do." Most often, we can only afford to choose between two (or more) evils, and the best we can do is choose the lesser one. For example, when I grade my students' papers, my main concern is to be fair and to grade them on the basis of a rubric that I will apply impartially to all of them. But: what about the international student who is working twice as much as his peers because she struggles with the language and still performs under average? Or what about the student that, out of the week allowed to complete an assignment, can only use two days because she has to work in order to sustain herself? In order to be "equally" evaluate all of my students, I should not take any of these elements into account, and simply focus on the quality of the individual paper I am reading. But at the same time, if I disregard the structural factors affecting a student's performance, what I am doing is simply pretending that what I am dealing with is a level playing field, whereas I know very well that this is not the case. What does moral theory tell us? There seems not to be an ideal solution, in cases like this: the "best thing to do," in most cases, will be the result of a complex reasoning process aimed at balancing the different principles and interests at stake and producing the least amount of injustice, while at the same time remaining aware that there will be no way, for us as moral agents, to just do the right thing. In one way or another, some injustice will be produced. This point will become particularly relevant when I will get to the implications of my

view of violence, in the next two chapters. If violence is the very context in which we live and act, as I will claim, then "action" will have to be defined in terms of the position we choose to take in that context of violence.

Slavoj Žižek, as we have seen, focuses on the harm that the economic and political structures of neoliberal capitalism cause on individuals. Other theories also recognize the crucial role capitalism plays in structural violence, but do not consider it the primary factor. Authors in the feminist tradition, for example, look at other dimensions of violence as primary, which affect not only the material conditions of individual lives, but the very subjectivity of the individuals targeted by social and political structures. In fact, critiques of structural violence à la Žižek, in this perspective, not only seem to presuppose, but also to invoke the notion of subjectivity and its intrinsic value in order to make the claim that certain social, political, and economic structures do violence on the individuals who live in them and to condemn that violence. Feminist theory (or some of it, at least), as well as Afro-pessimism, claim that women and Black people have been traditionally excluded precisely from the domain of proper "subjects" and that therefore the violence we should primary focus on takes place at a different, deeper level than the one at which the economic system operates. Patriarchy and anti-Blackness, according to these approaches, violate what they consider to be the very essence of the human being by excluding individuals on the basis of gender and race. The appeal to an allegedly universal idea of the human being and its intrinsic dignity, which is common to many critiques of violence, is thus a problematic one: since the Enlightenment, in particular, the equality of all human beings and their sharing a set of basic, natural rights have been proclaimed and made a founding principle of many international declarations and Western democracies. At the same time, however, the same societies that produced these ideals were excluding entire groups of individuals and entire populations from

the set of human beings whose rights were considered natural and inalienable. According to some authors, such an understanding of the subject actually *requires* that individuals understood as "other" be expunged from the set of the "subjects" in order for them to function and to retain the features, the liberties, the dignity which are usually at the core of the "universal" notion of the human being.

In the next two sections, I discuss the ways in which feminist theory and Afro-pessimism understand this exclusion as a form of violence and argue that they implicitly challenge a definition of structural violence based on the concepts of harm and injury, requiring at the very least that we explain what that harm and that injury consist of. Before I proceed to the discussion of these approaches, it is important to notice that these two trajectories of analysis can only be distinguished analytically. An essential reference, in this sense, is intersectionality, a theoretical model which understands identity and oppression not as emerging out of a multiplicity of juxtaposed features, but as the intersection of different "axes" of identity (race, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability and disability, age, etc.) that affect and reshape each other, thereby constituting the individual as a complex, multilayered whole.[19] Identity, thus, can never be explained by referring to only one of its axes: rather, we ought to explain identity by discussing the *interaction* of the multiple aspects (some of which will bring advantage, some of which will bring disadvantage) that make up one's existence. In this way, by following this approach, it is

[19] For an introduction to intersectional theory, see K. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991), no. 6: 1241–99. In this groundbreaking article, Crenshaw shows the limitations of a separate analysis of the roles of gender and race through the case of violence against women of color. In this context, she observes that "many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race and gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and […] the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" (1244); she thus argues that we need to account for "multiple grounds of identity" (including class, sexuality, and other axes of identity as well) and their interactions in order to understand the functioning of our social world but also in order to avoid the shortcomings of identity politics. Among these, the tendency to underplay intragroup differences is a primary one, which – for example – leads to the incapacity to represent and address issues of women of color that resist being reduced either to the discourse of feminism or to the discourse of antiracism.

never really possible to talk about gender without talking about race and explaining how the two influence each other, or without talking about sexual orientation and how it further affects the already complex interaction of gender and race, or without considering the influence of socioeconomic status on these aspects of one's life, etc. In what follows, thus, I will incorporate in my discussion the contribution of two theoretical approaches – feminist theory and Afro-pessimism – that specifically focus on gender and race, but I will do so by always keeping in mind that in reality these two axes of identity always present themselves as inextricably intertwined and cannot be understood outside of this connection and mutual influence.

2.2 *Structural Violence and Gender*

If we look at the first documents in the humanist tradition, like the U.S. *Declaration of Independence* (1776) or the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* (1789), we read statements like "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"[20] or "men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good."[21] These statements, which come from a shared intellectual tradition, affirm the equality of all men, simply in virtue of their being human. Human beings have certain rights by *nature*, and such rights are inalienable. Both documents recognize liberty or freedom and property among the fundamental human rights.

What is striking about these documents and the societies which produced them (the United States and France, in this case) is that while they affirmed the equality of all men, they were also

[20] *Declaration of Independence*, available at http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html (accessed on Nov. 21, 2015).
[21] *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*, art. 1, available at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/rightsof.asp (accessed on Nov. 21, 2015).

slave-holding societies, whether at home or abroad. In addition, neither of them granted the same rights to men and women. Olympe de Gouges, a writer and political activist who fought for the right of women and for the abolition of slavery in the French colonies, wrote an alternative version of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*, the *Declaration of the Rights of Women* (1791).[22] She challenged the official *Declaration*'s exclusion of women, for example by replacing the formulation of the first article with the following: "Woman is born free and lives equal to man in her rights. Social distinctions can be based only on the common utility." Toward the end of de Gouges' *Declaration*, we read that "the constitution is null if the majority of individuals comprising the nation have not cooperated in drafting it." She thus refuses to recognize a state that has not been built equally by men and women. The extent to which men were willing to listen to her concerns – the same men who had drafted the original *Declaration*, to be sure – is proven by the fact that Olympe de Gouges was condemned for being counterrevolutionary and went to the guillotine in 1793, two years after writing the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*. What do those documents mean by "all human beings," then? They do use the term "men," in fact, so we could just leave it at that: they are pretty explicit in their exclusion of women. But these documents were still making a universal claim, and we may choose not to discount them for simply being illogical. One may ask, however: what is it that makes all human beings *equal*? Typically, in the history of Western thought, *rationality* has been identified as the defining trait and as the feature that distinguishes human beings from all other beings, as opposed to instincts, emotions, feelings. The ground for excluding women and people of color from the set of beings that are considered fully human has typically been the fact that they were considered to *not* own or display the same rational capacities that (white) men did, to

[22] O. de Gouges, *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*, in L. Hunt (ed.), *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History,* Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996, 124–129, art. 1. Also available at http://csivc.csi.cuny.edu/americanstudies/files/lavender/decwom2.html (retrieved on November 21, 2015).

be closer to the sphere of irrationality and bestiality (instincts, emotions, feelings) than to the sphere of rationality (detachment, objectivity, self-sufficiency).[23] These ideas were certainly not new to the moderns, but date back at the very least to Plato and Aristotle. As a matter of fact, anyway, since rationality was understood as the defining feature of human nature, and women and people of color were viewed as not fully rational, they were excluded from the rights attached to humanity *by nature*. Women and people of color were not seen as having the same *value* of white men and, as a consequence, were excluded from the kind of recognition and *protections* that the notion of human rights could afford them. The declared *universality* of the humanist values affirmed in these documents (and also in more recent ones, but this would be the topic of another dissertation) was, in fact, a very limited notion.

I mentioned Olympe de Gouges as an early example of the recognition, on the part of women, of their exclusion and of the mystified ideas about their nature. Feminist theory, in general, has challenged the idea of the alleged universality of the human subject and has shown that women are treated as "other" than fully human insofar as "human" has traditionally been equated with "man." In this sense, Simone de Beauvoir writes that man is viewed as:

> [B]oth the positive and the neuter to such an extent that in French *hommes* designates human beings, the particular meaning of the word *vir* being assimilated into the general meaning of "homo." Woman is the negative, to such a point that any determination is imputed to her as a limitation, without reciprocity.[24]

[23] For a reconstruction of the cultural processes that contributed to this view, in particular regarding race, see J. Livingstone Smith, *Less than Human. Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others*. New York: St. Martin's Press 2011. See also E. C. Eze (ed.), *Race and the Enlightenment*. Malden, MA: Blackwell 1997, and R. Bernasconi and T. L. Lott (eds.), *The Idea of Race*. Indianapolis: Hackett 2000. For an analysis of the understanding of women in the history of philosophy, see N. Tuana, *Woman and the History of Philosophy*, New York: Paragon House 1992.
[24] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. First Edition. New York: Vintage, 2011, 5.

Women are understood *in contrast* or *in opposition* to men: a woman, in this view, is thus a being that is *relative* to another, but cannot be defined in relation to herself, i.e. to her own nature. Man is the default for "human being," and any being that does not fall under the category of "man" must be defined in relation to it: "humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself. She is not considered an autonomous being."[25] Maleness (and whiteness, as we will see) define humanity, and everything else is considered "other" than fully and legitimately human.

The notion (and mechanism) of *othering* plays a central role here. In part, "othering" may be explained in terms of a natural mechanism whereby each human group considers itself as the default and living beings belonging to other groups as "other."[26] This phenomenon is quite common among human groups, and social scientists call it *ethnocentrism*: one interesting example of this basic dynamic is that many languages display the people's belief that the members of their group are the only true human beings – in fact, the name typically used to denote one's own group means "men" or "human beings". For example, the word "Deutsch" (German), comes from an Indo-European root meaning "human beings", and most myths about the origin of a group make it coincide with the origin of humanity itself.[27] A similar mechanism may be seen as playing a key role in the formation of the self. Hegel, for example, discussed it in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where he provided an account of how consciousness needs to see the other consciousness(es) it relates to as "other than itself" in order to understand and identify itself *as a self*. Beauvoir has precisely this dialectical relation in mind when she describes how man understands himself by othering woman, in a way that is never reciprocal:

[25] Ibid.
[26] On in-group and out-group dynamics see E. Bencivenga, "Discriminating from Within." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 28, no. 3 (1998): 217–21.
[27] See Livingstone Smith, *Less than Human*, 57-58.

> She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is a Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.[28]

This passage emphasizes that the very meaning of "woman" – not only as a term, but as a being – is derivative on that of "man," which is understood as the essential, the absolute. "Absolute," in its literal meaning, is what is detached and independent from anything else but itself, whereas the Other, what is defined in relation to it, does not have an independent existence, and only acquires its meaning (if it does at all) by virtue of it. This is not only a semantic issue, but a dynamic that has profound consequences in terms of women's existence. Typically, as Beauvoir notes, othering mechanisms are reciprocal (as in ethnocentrism, for example, or in Hegel's theory of consciousness), but in this case the othering only works in one direction, and therefore woman is posited as "pure alterity." This is a key difference between basic, "natural" othering mechanisms and the one that is at play here. It is also something to keep in mind as a counterargument to attempts at naturalizing oppression as something humans "have always done and will always do."[29]

What are the consequences of this understanding of woman? In Beauvoir's existentialist perspective, this conceptualization of women displays its clearest effects in the relegation of women to the sphere of immanence, that is, to the sphere of natural life and its reproduction. This sphere is opposed to the sphere of transcendence, where human beings have the opportunity to assume their finitude and at the same time overcome its limits, expressing their freedom through projects and engagements with life that exceed its mere *biological* dimension. Beauvoir's work provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding the ways in which our social and

[28] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 6.

[29] It should be noted, however, that this is not the only way of explaining the formation of the self: other views emphasize the (non-conflictual) interdependence of all "selves" and thus the collective or social dimension of subjectivity. The individual self, in this kind of view, is a result of its relations with other selves and is connected to the other selves in a substantial way. I will discuss this view in the next section and in Chapter Three, when discussing the capabilities approach.

economic structures embody an understanding of some people as not fully human and, in this way, harm their subjectivity. This framework can be enriched and made more detailed by bringing into the conversation some of the more recent feminist theorists and their rich analyses of the numerous forms of women's subordination.

The so-called second wave of feminist thought has provided, for example, important discussions of the sexual division of labor both in productive and reproductive work; of the exclusion of women from participation in the public sphere; of the many ways in which patriarchal societies deprive women of control over their own bodies and in particular over biological reproduction (here I refer to reproductive rights in a broad sense, from the denied access to birth control and abortion to forced sterilization[30]); of the separation between the private and the public sphere, whose consequences range from the refusal to deal with issues such as marital rape and domestic violence in general as political issues to the relegation of women's work to the home and to the related denial of their full personhood, citizenship, and human rights.[31] In regards to the latter aspect in particular, Carole Pateman's work on social contract theory is particularly relevant and helps to identify one of the bases of the kind of violence I am trying to describe. Her main thesis is that the social contract is fundamentally a sexual contract, whose function is to grant men power over, and sexual access to, women. Women, in turn, are excluded from the signatories of the contract and thus are not considered as full participants in the social structure emerging from it. Pateman argues that:

> Standard accounts of social contract theory do not discuss the whole story and contemporary contract theorists give no indication that half the agreement is missing. The story of the sexual contract is also about the genesis of political right, and explains why exercise of the right is legitimate – but this story

[30] See for example A. Davis, "Racism, Birth Control, and Reproductive Rights," in Id. *Women, Race and Class*, London: The Women's Press/New York: Random House 1983, 202-271.
[31] For example, see S. M. Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, New York: Basic Books 1989, and C. Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1988.

> is about political right as *patriarchal right* or sex right, the power that men exercise over women. The missing half of the story tells how a specifically modern form of patriarchy is established. The new civil society created through the original contract is a patriarchal social order.[32]

And further:

> Men's domination over women, and the right of men to enjoy equal sexual access to women, is at issue in the making of the original pact. The social contract is a story of freedom; the sexual contract is a story of subjection. The original contract constitutes both freedom and domination.[33]

Our social structure, in this view, is built upon the freedom of men which, in turn, is founded in the domination of women and their exclusion from the domain of free individuals. Sandra Lee Bartky, among others, has analyzed the domination and oppression of women through the Hegelian-Marxist theory of alienation, which for her constitutes the defining trait of femininity. Marx regards labor as the exteriorization of the worker's being and the objectification – understood as actualization – of human powers and abilities. However, under capitalism, the worker is alienated from the products of his labor, and therefore deprived of the ability to exteriorize herself. This produces a "fragmentation of the human person," which Bartky regards as "the consequence of a form of social organization which has given to some persons the power to prohibit other persons from the full exercise of capacities the exercise of which is thought necessary to a fully human existence."[34] For Bartky, Marx's theory of alienation cannot be applied to women as it is, but needs to be further developed in order to account for the specific kind of fragmentation of the self they are subjected to, which she explains in terms of a "loss of being."[35] Specific ways in which women are alienated from themselves include cultural

[32] C. Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, 1.
[33] Ibid.
[34] S. L. Bartky, "Narcissism, Femininity, and Alienation," *Social Theory and Practice* 8 (1982), no. 2: 127-143, here 129. See also Ead., *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, New York: Routledge 1990.
[35] "Narcissism, Femininity, and Alienation," 129.

domination[36], sexual alienation – as part of the more general alienation of women from their body – and sexual objectification, which reduces women's entire being to their body as a sexual instrument and implies the denial that women have any other capacities.

What these forms of structural violence, as performed by social, political, and economic structures have in common, is the failure to recognize women as full human beings and the design of a social order that reflects this conception. Let us now return, for a moment, to the concept of structural violence. As we can observe in the case of gender, difference – especially if considered in relation to an unstated norm like "man" or "white" are – can be used to establish hierarchies and inequalities between groups of people, and the ways in which this happens affect the entire sphere of women's existence. In part, this is an empirical question that has to do with the concrete manifestations of inequality. A substantial part of feminist theory, of which I only recalled what I consider some illuminating examples, has been devoted to identifying and analyzing the multiple ways in which gender-based inequality is imposed and perpetuated.[37]

What is worth noticing is that the ways in which gender-based inequality is imposed cannot be reduced or understood exclusively in terms of exceptional, individual acts of violence – although of course there's a lot of physical violence involved – but are part of what counts as the *status quo*, the way things work on a regular basis or, as Mary Anglin put it, "violence in the

[36] "Cultural domination," for Bartky, consists of both the exclusion of women from cultural production and the fact that most avenues of cultural expression are also instruments of male supremacy.

[37] Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, brilliantly discusses biology, history, myths about "Woman," childhood, adolescence, sexuality, marriage, motherhood, prostitution, love, etc. For Catharine MacKinnon, just to mention another example, sexuality is the key category of analysis insofar as it is the main site for the creation of "woman" as a subordinate, inferior being. For her, hierarchy is established through sexuality and sexuality works and is understood in terms of hierarchy. In particular, she claims that *gender* is created through sexuality, which in turn is characterized by submission, degradation, and violence against women (or subordinate people, which are thus feminized). See for example C. MacKinnon, "Sexuality", in Ead., *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, Harvard University Press, 1989: 126-154, and "Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: Pleasure under Patriarchy," *Ethics* 99 (1989), no. 2: 314-46.

guise of social stability and order."[38] What this means is that structural violence is not necessarily visible or recognizable as such, but is rather the (apparently) non-violent background, the very stage on which individual acts of subjective, physical violence take place and from which the conditions for them to take place are generated.

There is, however, a fundamental difference with respect to the structural violence that capitalism is responsible for and that I briefly mentioned above: although *gendered* structural violence definitely and profoundly affects the material conditions of one's life, it expands beyond them. Given that what underlies the differential understanding and treatment of women as *particular*, *different* human beings is the notion that woman is Other, and that she participates mostly in the non-rational sphere rather than fully sharing the rationality that defines humanity as such, this is a kind of violence that happens at the *ontological* level, where the very definition of woman as a human being is at stake.

Structural violence in this particular sense happens when the very conditions defining some people's lives are violent. This theme is explicitly at the core of Afro-pessimism: in the next section, I turn to the discussion of its tenets and of their implications for a theory of violence.

2.3 *Structural Violence and Anti-Blackness*

The reason why I take afro-Pessimism, among all theories of race, as a key reference for my reflection on violence, is that it offers a discussion of violence in the most extreme form one can possibly imagine, one that is more radical than any other form of violence I have analyzed so far. As a consequence, I believe that a theory of violence cannot be adequate if it does not account for this specific form. Afro-pessimism, in this sense, is both a source of insight into the essence of violence and a theoretical framework that challenges any theoretical effort at

[38] Mary K. Anglin, "Feminist Perspectives on Structural Violence," *Identities* 5 (1998), no. 2: 145–51, here 145.

understanding violence by forcing it to make sense of a form of radical violation of the human that resists explanation in any way that is familiar – or reassuring, for that matter – to us.

To begin with, Afro-pessimism radically challenges the Enlightenment discourse concerning the "universal value of all men" and their inalienable rights – which, as I noted above, is importantly limited in its consideration of who counts as a "man" or as a human being:

> "Humanist discourse, whose epistemological machinations provide our conceptual frameworks for thinking political ontology, is diverse and contrary. But for all its diversity and contrariness it is sutured by an implicit rhetorical consensus that violence accrues to the Human body as a result of transgressions, whether real or imagined, within the symbolic order. That is to say, *Humanist discourse can only think a subject's relation to violence as a contingency and not as a matrix that positions the subject*. Put another way, Humanism has no theory of the Slave because it imagines a subject who has been either alienated in language or alienated from his or her cartographic and temporal capacities. It cannot imagine an object who has been positioned by gratuitous violence and who has no cartographic and temporal capacities to lose – a sentient being for whom recognition and incorporation is impossible. In short, political ontology, as imagined through Humanism, can only produce discourse that has as its foundation alienation and exploitation as a grammar of suffering, when what is needed (for the Black, who is always already a Slave) is an ensemble of ontological questions that has as its foundation accumulation and fungibility as a grammar of suffering."[39]

In this passage are condensed some of the main issues that define the Afro-pessimist approach. Wilderson observes that the humanist discourse can only understand violence as the result of a transgression – that is, violence is supposed to follow the infringement of the rules of our social and political order, or some other order – and thus as a form of retribution for something we have done. In other words, we may say, violence is a *contingent* feature of the relations individuals entertain with each other or with the social and political system they belong to. What humanist discourse is unable to account for, however, is a violence that is not a contingency – and contingent upon a transgression – but rather "a matrix that positions the subject." In other words, for some individuals violence is not one (possible) event (among

[39] F. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Durham: Duke University Press 2010, 54-55 (italics mine).

others) in the course of a life that is otherwise characterized, but is the defining feature of life itself, and therefore, the feature defining the way they are in the world.

The central thesis of Afro-pessimism is that Blackness, in the United States and in the Western world in general, is equivalent to Slaveness today as it did in the past. As Wilderson puts it:

> Slavery is and connotes an ontological status for Blackness; and […] the constituent elements of slavery are not exploitation and alienation but *accumulation and fungibility* (as Hartman puts it): the condition of being *owned and traded*.[40]

This ontological status is unique to Blackness not because there are no other human beings (although the Black is not considered a human being, in this framework) who can be owned and trained – e.g., the professional athlete or the traditional bride – but because this condition is one of the possible experiences some people can have, one of the possible features of some people's lives, whereas accumulation and fungibility are the *defining features* of the slave's ontological status, that is: there is nothing outside them, there is no experience available to the slave that can take place outside or beyond those boundaries.

Orlando Patterson's study on slavery can provide the conceptual tools to understand what this ontological status consists of. Patterson's starting assumption is that "all human relationships are structured and defined by the relative power of the interacting persons."[41] Power is understood, in Max Weber's terms, as one's capacity to carry out one's will, even in the face of resistance. Accordingly, relations of inequality or domination can range from those characterized by slight asymmetries of power to those in which one person has total power over another, with impunity. This understanding of power and of human relationships provides the conceptual

[40] Ibid., 14.
[41] O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death. A Comparative Study*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1982, 1.

foundation for the definition of slavery, which Patterson characterizes as "the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons."[42] This definition names three constituent elements of slavery: (1) the first is violence, originary and gratuitous; violence plays a crucial role in creating and maintaining slavery, as it is necessary in order to turn the free man into a slave but must also be repeated in order to maintain that status – it is thus a form of social and, we may say, ontological control.[43] (2) The second constituent element of slavery is "natal alienation," an expression that refers to the fact that the slave's relations to his ancestors and his descendants are severed. Patterson observes that this makes the slave a "genealogical isolate. Formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived, he also was culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors."[44] This makes the slave a "socially dead person," someone who, as alienated from all rights of birth and therefore from her history, does not belong to any "legitimate social order."[45] (3) The third constituent element of slavery is "general dishonor": "The slave […] could have no honor because he had no power and no independent social existence [that is, independent from that of the master], hence no public worth. He had no name of his own to defend."[46] General dishonor, for the slave, implies that he is the object of social stigma independent of his conduct. He is *a priori* dishonored. This aspect is particularly important in regards to the psychology of the master, which Patterson discusses at depth and several authors in the Afro-pessimist tradition consider as crucial: the slave's deprivation of honor is directly proportional to the acquisition of the master's sense of honor. In fact, especially in ancient times, many masters acquired slaves as a means of strengthening their sense of honor and thus their social standing. This is important insofar as it explains more recent dynamics and

[42] Ibid., 14.
[43] Ibid., 3.
[44] Ibid., 5.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., 10.

constitutes the foundation for the claim that the existence, conceptual coherence, and psychological integrity of white men ("humans") is guaranteed by Black social death.[47]

These three elements taken together – originary, gratuitous, non-contingent violence, natal alienation, and general dishonor - characterize a position that is unique from the ontological and anthropological point of view: there is no position comparable to that of the slave. One or more of this elements can also characterize the experience of other groups in the course of human history, but no other group is *structurally defined* by these features.[48] The violence and the violation of humanity, of subjectivity, is originary and structuring for the Black experience, whereas it is only *contingent* for other groups.[49] Other groups can appeal to other constituent elements of their identity in order to understand what and who they are. The slave cannot do so.

If we try to make sense of these claims in the context of a theory of structural violence, the task may seem arduous: the kind of violence Afro-pessimism describes cannot be easily assimilated to the violence we have discussed earlier, that is, the one we have equated to social injustices and inequalities, discrimination, or oppression. These forms of violence are all relevant, to be sure, to the experience of the slave. But the general and radical violation of the slave's

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[47] An analogous claim has been made by several feminist theorists in regard to the relation between man and woman. For example, in the Manifesto of the Italian feminist group "Rivolta Femminile" we read that man's "psychological balance" is "based on [woman's] submission." See C. Lonzi, C. Accardi, E. Banotti, "Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile," in C. Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel. La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti. Scritti di rivolta femminile* 1, 2, 3. Milano: Rivolta Femminile 1974. Carla Lonzi, in her famous piece "Let's Spit on Hegel," wrote that "the family is the cornerstone of the patriarchal order: it is founded not only on economic interests but on the *psychic mechanisms* of men who in every epoch have kept women as objects of domination and as the *foundation for their own higher achievements*." See C. Lonzi, "Let's Spit on Hegel," in P. J. Mills (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of G.W.F. Hegel*, University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press 2010: 275-297, here 283 (italics mine).

[48] This thesis is at the core of Wilderson's *Red, White, and Black*. See in particular the first chapter, "The Ruse of Analogy." For an introduction to Afro-pessimist thought, in addition to Wilderson's text, see among others: D. Marriott, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 2007; S. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press 1997; J. Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2008; H. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2003.

[49] It is in this sense that slavery is to be understood as a relation, and not as an event.

humanity and the erasure of his subjectivity, which constitute his ontological status, seem to take place at a deeper level and to stretch the definition of structural violence I have been working with up to this point to its extreme. It may be the case, in fact, that the forms of structural violence described above turn out to be, once again, derivative with respect to this radical and unique form of violence.

If this the case, it is clear that the notion of subjectivity we are dealing with cannot be reduced to the idea of an isolated and self-sufficient self. In other words, if we say that the violence done to the woman and to the slave *qua* human beings is more radical, to the point that it is said to take place at the ontological level and not only at the material one – whether we understand the latter as being physical or concerning the economic conditions of one's life – then this means that we understand subjectivity to include more than one's bodily integrity or the access to material resources. It seems that both feminism and Afro-pessimism, in fact, refer to a notion of subjectivity that includes more than bodily integrity: to borrow from the latter theoretical framework, the subject is defined by both spatial and temporal capacities. The former would seem to include bodily integrity, the capacity to move and to determine one's location. The latter refers to a set of capacities that revolve around the social dimension of subjectivity, including the relation to one's history, the bonds with ancestors and descendants, and the capacity to determine one's future. Bell hooks emphasizes the social or collective dimension of the self when she writes that the self exists precisely "in relation," that it is "dependent for its very being on the lives of everyone" and defines it "not as signifier of one 'I' but the coming together of many 'I's, the self as embodying collective reality past and present, family and community."[50] Hooks claims that the social dimension is what primarily constitutes the self, and

[50] bell hooks, "On Self-Recovery," in *Talking Back. Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End Press 1988, 30-31.

it is explicitly related to its temporal dimension insofar as it includes the family (ascendants and descendants) and the community in which one lives. The self, then, does not exist in isolation and it is thus neither self-contained nor self-sufficient: this point will become central in the next chapter, where I will propose my theory of violence as violation of the human potential and detail my understanding of what such potential consists of.

3. *Galtung: Violence as Limitation of the Human Potential*

The exploration of these kinds of extreme violation, which target the very humanity of some groups of people, reveal some inadequacies of the definition of structural violence I started with. And they seem inadequate not because what they focus on – namely, the harm and injury caused on individuals by certain social structures – is not a *part* of the violence that concerns women and Black people. But the concepts of harm and injury do not seem to be able to capture the depth of the violation that feminist theory and Afro-pessimism describe. There seem to be two options, then: we need to either explain what we mean by harm or injury or to find a core concept for the definition of violence that more adequately accounts for the forms of violation that I have been discussing in the course of this chapter. It is also possible, however, that these two options amount to one and the same solution, or in other words, that the explanation of the content of the concept of harm takes us to another concept, which will enrich our understanding of what it is that violence *does*.

In order to address these questions, we can start from a definition of structural violence that importantly differs from the standard definition based on harm and/or injury and that seems promising insofar as the conceptual framework it proposes seems to be able to make room for the broader, comprehensive theory of violence I am trying to build. Johan Galtung is a Norwegian

sociologist and the founder of the discipline called "peace and conflict studies"; he was actually the first to introduce the notion of "structural violence" in a groundbreaking article published in 1969. There, his main goal was to clarify the concept of peace. One thing we know about peace is that it requires the absence of violence, he claims, and therefore it is crucial to understand what counts as violence in order to identify the specific content of the notion of peace. This is a critical point: if only clearly identifiable physical aggressions counts as violence, then the concept of peace will occupy a relatively narrow space in the semantic (and social, and political) field. But if our notion of violence is broader, then much more than the absence of physical aggression will be necessary in order to say that a certain social order is "in peace" – and this is the direction Galtung chooses:

> [V]iolence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations.[51]

Galtung explicitly rejects a narrow definition of violence as strictly related, and limited to, bodily injury, deprivation of health, and the notion of a clearly identified (or *in principle* identifiable) agent who intends the consequences of her act. While his definition includes "somatic incapacitation," as he calls it, it extends far beyond it: indeed, he looks at a more comprehensive sense of "incapacitation," one that considers overall human development and realization understood as a gradual transition from the *potential* to the *actual*. If such transition is hampered, and therefore a *difference* is produced between potential and actual, then there is violence. Violence, in this perspective, is thus defined as the *cause* of the difference between the potential and the actual, "between what could have been and what is," provided that such difference could have been avoided.

[51] J. Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research* 6 (1969), no. 3: 167–91, here 168.

This understanding of violence has significant implications concerning the notion of peace: if we accept a restricted (i.e. physicalist) notion of violence, then we will conceive of peace – correspondingly – as just the absence of physical aggression against individuals. However, if violence is viewed as a *quality* of the economic, social, and political structure, then the concept of "peace" requires much more than the mere absence of direct, personal violence: once violence is defined in structural terms, the concept of peace becomes a positive concept requiring (substantial) positive action, namely the readjustment of the unbalanced distribution of power and resources.[52]

In order to fully grasp the implications of this view, we need to unpack Galtung's definition of violence and to clarify some of the concepts he employs. More specifically, we need to understand and problematize the notions of potential and actual, what it means for the difference between the two to be avoidable, and, relatedly, what role natural causes can be said to play in limiting the realization of one's potential. "Potential," in particular, is a widely used term, but the meaning we attribute to it can be very vague. In order to clarify this concept, it may be useful to refer to Aristotle's classical discussion of potency and act in Book IX of the *Metaphysics*.

According to Aristotle, potentiality is a "starting-point of change" which can be located "in another thing or in the thing itself *qua* other":[53] the concept of potentiality, in other words, explains change (or "becoming") in an object as the transition from one state to another, whose source can be located in the thing itself or in another object which acts on it and causes it to change. The movement from the potential (the initial state, which includes the thing's ability to change) to the actual (the effected change) takes place if "nothing external" or "nothing in [the

[52] Galtung explicitly identifies "positive peace" with "social justice" (183).
[53] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in J. Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press 1984, vol. 2, 1651.

thing itself]" hinders it.[54] We can regard the movement from potential to actual, then, as a *path* that *will* lead from point A to point B – understood as different states of a thing – unless something hinders it, whether the cause of this hindrance be in another thing preventing the development to make its course, or in the thing itself, which might lack the capacity to effect the change: the healing of a body, for example, can be made impossible by external circumstances or by an inability of the body itself to heal, or by a combination of internal and external causes.

This path, however, is not completely *open* or *undetermined* as far as its *direction* is concerned, and that is why the notion of "potential" is a very specific one: a thing's "potential" is not a capacity to become *anything*. Each thing, depending on its nature, can change in a given number of ways, which are specific to the thing in question and limited. An apple seed, for example, will become an apple tree if all the necessary conditions obtain and nothing hinders its development, but it will not become a goat or a pumpkin plant. The apple seed has the potential of becoming an apple tree (or not), and that's it. Aristotle makes this clear by saying that actuality is *prior* to potentiality in three different respects (substance, time, and formula). With respect to priority in the formula, he says that "the formula and the knowledge" of actuality "must precede" the knowledge of the potential."[55] In this sense, then, a thing's potentiality is to be determined *backwards*: by looking at the fully developed thing in front of us, we may say that at some previous stage in its development, that thing had the potential to become what it is now. This aspect may sound obvious, or even trivial, but it is crucial as far as the *scope* of the notion of potentiality is concerned. We must keep in mind that Aristotle's main concern in his discussion of the notion of potentiality and actuality is with the natural sphere, and in particular with biology, and that we need to understand such discussion as being influenced by, and at the

[54] Ibid., 1656.
[55] Ibid., 1657.

same time built upon, examples from the biological world. That the potential is determined, thus, does not mean that each and every thing has the potentiality to change exclusively in one direction, or, in other words, that whatever we are looking at in the present state of affairs is the only way the present state of affairs could have been. Not every being's development is as simple as an apple seed: complex beings (or situations) have more possible paths of development than an apple seeds, and we can try to identify them based on the conditions in which the lives of these beings or these situations develop.

How can this be helpful in articulating the definition of structural violence? To begin with, we can understand an individual's potential as a set of possibilities an individual has concerning the kind of life they are going to live and the kind of person they are going to be, and this includes somatic aspects but also aspects pertaining to one's psychological, emotional, intellectual, and personal development. This set is *determined*, which means that, although humans have a great variety of possible paths for their development, the circumstances of our existence and our personal characteristics determine a (limited) number of such paths. The one path we will actually take in the unfolding of our life, then, depends on a number of variables, which may be internal (for example, the choices we make) and/or external (for example, the kinds of resources available to us, which can make it more likely for us to develop in one direction rather than another, and how "free" we are to choose a direction). "If nothing hinders it," as Aristotle writes, our path will then take us from the potential to the actual level of our realization, through a process which unfolds over the course of our entire life. Here we can recall Galtung's definition of structural violence, in particular where he refers to human beings "being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential

realizations."[56] The "hindrance" manifests, for Galtung, in the form of an external influence on the unfolding of the path leading from the potential to the actual. One note is in order here: it is quite clear that there can be both internal and external *causes* of the difference between potential and actual, as I mentioned earlier. For the purposes of the discussion of structural violence, however, I will focus on causes and factors influencing one's actualization that come from the outside, and not from within the individual itself.

The phrase "structural violence" seems to point to an external cause for the difference between potential and actual, which is referred to as a "structure." This term, by itself, is not very clear or specific: what do we mean, exactly, when we say that the "structure" is responsible for a form of violence that is exercised on the individuals inhabiting it or exposed to it? "Structure" comes from the Latin *struo*, which means "to heap up," "to build," and "to connect," "to conjoin." The original meaning of the term thus combines two distinct but related semantic fields. The first refers to the action of building something by piling up, or combining, a set of materials or elements. The second refers to the action of putting those elements in some kind of relation, by connecting them. A structure, then, may be defined as something that is made of different parts or elements; these parts or elements are joined with one another and arranged in such a way that this arrangement, and thus the relations between the different parts that it establishes, produce a unitary, though complex, whole.

When we talk about structural violence we usually refer to the violence produced by the interaction of social, political, and economic factors. This means that we refer to a multiplicity of elements constituting a structure which, precisely in virtue of their particular arrangement, cause the difference between the potential and the actual level of realization of an individual's potential. This characterization needs an important qualification: the definition of "structure," as it

[56] Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," 168.

specifically applies to the discussion of structural violence, includes a variety of human-made elements (social, political, economic mechanisms) but excludes natural factors. While it is true that natural factors like famine, earthquakes, and floods cause a difference between the potential and the actual realization of human beings (and of nature itself, in some ways), Galtung seems to be interested in that difference as long as it is avoidable, or, in other words, the result of an action performed by human agents. In some cases, however, we might regard natural disasters as being relevant to our discussion of structural violence insofar as they result from lack of proper care or active destruction of the land and its resources. Where human communities over-exploit the land through deforestation and intensive urbanization, for example, the hydrogeological balance is disrupted and some regions become more prone to floods and landslides, or to droughts. The damage individuals suffer because of these events, which could have been avoided by pursuing a different model of urban development, can be regarded as an instance of structural violence. In cases like these, then, there is a combination of human and natural factors, but the fact that the natural event was avoidable is what makes them instances of structural violence, for which humans (who build the structure and ensure its functioning) are responsible.[57] A further, partly different way to appreciate this point is to consider whether the same natural event, for example an earthquake, occurs in a poor or a in wealthy region: the impact that the same earthquake will have on the affected populations will depend on the availability of, and access to, resources, including state-of-the-art anti-seismic buildings and infrastructures, safety procedures in place, and other important factors that make a difference in such cases. In this case, the natural event is unavoidable but the kind of consequences it causes for different human groups is entirely determined by the social, political, and economic structure in place. In conclusion, then, we can

[57] These instances, in particular as related to environmental crises caused by humans, have been recently described as "slow violence" in a way that seems compatible with the analysis presented here. See R. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2011.

consider the cases in which there is an *interaction* between natural and human factors, which produces a difference between the potential and actual realization of an individual's life, as cases where the (social, political, and economic) structure is what does violence to people, whether the structure itself is responsible for the occurrence of certain natural events or in the face of natural events that are out of our control but that could be less destructive if access to appropriate resources were available.

If we now return to Galtung's discussion of structural violence, we can see what are the forms of violence following from his definition of violence as the cause of an avoidable difference between potential and actual realization:

> The potential level of realization is that which is possible within a given level of insight and resources. If insight and/or resources are *monopolized* by a group or class or are *used for other purposes*, then the actual level falls below the potential level, and violence is present in the system. In addition to these types of *indirect* violence there is also the *direct* violence where means of realization are not withheld, but directly destroyed. Thus, when a war is fought there is direct violence since killing or hurting a person certainly puts his 'actual somatic realization' below his 'potential somatic realization'. But there is also indirect violence insofar as insight and resources are channeled away from constructive efforts to bring the actual closer to the potential.[58]

In this passage, Galtung claims that the potential is that which is possible within a specific level of *insight* and *resources*, thereby making it clear that the potential level of realization of an individual is determined by the conditions characterizing one's life. It seems, then, that this aspect of the definition of "potential" is compatible with the notion of potential we discussed above, although Galtung does not discuss it explicitly. If a certain amount of insight and resources are available and can be accessed by the individual (i.e., nothing "hinders" the individual in using that insight and those resources), then their potential will be realized. If

[58] Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," 169.

resources and insight are not available or cannot be accessed, then their potential is blocked and violence is in place (or "is in the system," as Galtung writes).

Conclusion

Galtung's account of structural violence, I believe, offers useful conceptual tools in order to build a theory of violence. His focus, however, is in particular on the social and economic conditions affecting the existence of individuals and populations. These are, of course, critical aspects of existence, but at the same time I believe that a further elaboration and an expansion of his account will provide the conceptual basis for a comprehensive theory of violence – one that is able to account for all the forms of violence we have discussed (including physical violence) and for many others that I haven't fully addressed, like psychological or verbal violence. In Galtung's terms, the availability and accessibility of insight and resources are what determines one's ability to realize their potential. In order to expand his account for our purposes, then, it seems that we need to specify what are the kinds of things whose unavailability or inaccessibility determine an individual's potential to be hindered in the ways we have seen throughout this chapter. In particular, given the features of violence based on gender and race that we have discussed, in order to do that we will need a theory of the subject that can guide us in determining what are the things or aspects whose development violence hinders, and that make it the particularly radical form of violence we find in sexism and racism.

In the next chapter, I propose a theory of violence based on the notion of potential, which integrates some important insights coming from the capabilities approach. I believe that the latter can offer two combined advantages: to begin with, it provides a detailed account of the human potential, understood as a set of capabilities whose development enables a human being to

flourish *as a human being*. Second, and relatedly, it offers a useful perspective that will enable us to further determine what it means to do violence to someone.

CHAPTER THREE

Violence as Incapacitation

In the previous chapter I discussed the structural view of violence, one that understands violence as a notion that includes physical harm or injury but also accounts for different forms of harm or injury: in particular, this kind of view focuses on the harm caused by the deprivation – understood as the unavailability and/or inaccessibility – of resources that are regarded as necessary to the development and well-being of individuals. Such development and well-being can be understood in different ways, as we have seen, and include material conditions, social factors, and the very possibility of being recognized as a human being and of being able to express such humanity in a variety of ways.

For the purposes of a theory of violence, the most important outcome of the examination of this particular kind of account is the conceptual structure offered by Galtung's definition, which is based on the idea that (structural) violence is that which hinders the realization of one's potential. Specifically, he focuses on the material conditions that determine the extent to which the "somatic and mental" potential of a human being can be realized. In the present chapter I will develop the conceptual structure of this definition into a general theory of violence: my aim is to show that all of the different events, acts, and dynamics we characterize as violent can be called violent because they share a similar structure, although such structure takes shape in different, apparently unrelated ways.

In what follows, I first present and discuss my definition of violence as incapacitation. I do so by further articulating the notion of potential and by explaining how my view differs from Galtung's. In the second section I incorporate some aspects of the capabilities approach,

developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, in my definition. This enables me to specify the content of the notion of human potential. Finally, in the third section, I illustrate some advantages and some problematic implications of my account and focus, among other things, on the conclusion that everything we do turns out to hinder someone's potential (and our own as well) and therefore to be violence. This discussion will show that the scope of personal responsibility, in my account, turns out to be much larger than we usually think, and that we need to reconsider our approach to morality in order to deal with such conclusion.

1. *The Definition of Violence as Limitation of the Potential*

Let us start by recalling that for Johan Galtung, (structural) violence is present "when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations."[1] As I observed in the previous chapter, this definition is built upon the concept of human potentiality. I believe that this way of defining violence is promising, but I also think that the notion of potentiality can be fruitfully used to define violence in a more general sense. I thus propose to define violence – not only in its structural form, but in all of its forms – as *incapacitation*, that is, as the limitation of the development or actualization of one's (or a thing's)[2] potential. More specifically, we can say that

> (1) "A violent action is an action performed by person A that limits or reduces the potential of person B."

[1] J. Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," 168.

[2] As I mentioned in the *Introduction*, this dissertation deals mostly with violence as it affects or concerns human beings. Although I cannot fully develop this point here, I believe that the same account may work for objects or non-human living beings by referring, once again, to an Aristotelian metaphysical framework and, in particular, to the notion of function: in this sense, for example, we may say that to do violence to an object is to do something that limits its ability to perform its function.

The scope of this definition is not limited to a specific form of violence, but aims to capture a *thread* that keeps together all the things we call violence. I believe that this is the main advantage of this definition, since it provides an account of what violence does independent of the forms it takes on in different contexts or in its different manifestations. I will say more about this point in the third section, where I discuss the advantages and some problematic implications of the view I propose. For now, it may be useful to recall some of the things I said about the notion of potential in the previous chapter, so that I can articulate the content of the notion of human potential in more detail. The notion of potential in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is key for the purposes of giving an account of becoming, that is, of change. This, in turn, can be understood as the transition between two different states of the same being. A being that *becomes* is said to have a capacity for change – i.e. the relevant potential – and thus the capacity to pass from one state to another. Such capacity has a limited scope when analyzing natural beings (e.g. plants), which constitute the main reference of Aristotle's discussion in this context. In the case of human beings, however, we can observe that the possible directions in which change can happen, i.e., the possible ways in which one's potential may be actualized, are multiple.[3] In addition, a being will take the direction of change and will effect such change "if nothing hinders it," whether the hindrance is internal to the being itself (for example, a state of the being's soul that prevents it from effecting the transition between different conditions[4]) or takes the form of another being preventing the first to follow its path of change.

[3] The appropriate references for Aristotle's discussion of potentiality in relation to human beings are the *De Anima* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

[4] An example of this dynamic can be found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle distinguishes between natural virtues and full virtues. The natural virtues are dispositions, potentialities for virtues we are born with. They need to be cultivated through education and acquisition of appropriate and relevant habits in order to become full, i.e. actual, virtues. If an individual fails to acquire the right habits, or cannot make themselves act virtuously, they will not reach the full actualization of their potential for virtue.

Potentiality, thus, for our purposes, is to be understood as a human being's capacity to change their state, qualities, or circumstances; whether this potentiality will turn into an actuality, and thus, whether the human being will be able to perform the transition from one state to the other, will depend on factors that are both internal and external, whose absence or presence will enable or prevent the change to take place. To illustrate this point, let us consider the example of a child and their potential to walk (which, to be precise, is the potentiality to acquire another potentiality[5]). This capacity can be acquired, and thus the child can perform the transition from state A (where it is unable to walk, but has the capacity to learn how to do it because it is the kind of being that can walk) to state B (where it acquires the ability to walk), if certain conditions obtain. Some of these conditions are internal: for example, the child will be able to learn how to walk if their body is properly developed and healthy: their feet, ankles, and knees must have grown correctly, their back must not have conditions that prevent it from supporting the body in an upright position, their heart must be functioning correctly, and so on. Some of these conditions are external: for example, no obstacles or hindrances should be in place and the child should be able to move without constraints. If these conditions do not obtain, the child's potential to walk will not be able to fully develop into the capacity to walk, which in turn they will be able to exercise if certain conditions (some of which coincide with the ones I listed above, some of which are in addition to those) will obtain. The limitation of human potential, thus, can

[5] For Aristotle, the two things I am calling potentialities, i.e. being the kind of thing that can (learn how to) walk and the ability to walk, correspond respectively to the concept of potentiality and to what he calls "first actuality." More specifically, this means that having the ability to walk constitutes both a potentiality and an actuality (the disposition or capacity to walk), whereas the act of walking, the exercise of that function, constitutes the "second actuality." Examples of this distinction are the distinctions between the faculty of sight (first actuality) and the act of seeing (second actuality), or the one between being in the state of knowing (first actuality) and attending to what one knows (second actuality). See *De Anima* 412 a 10 and 22-25, and 412 b 28-30. In 417 a 23-28 Aristotle refers to the first actuality as being a form of potentiality: "One way in which someone might know is the way we have in mind in saying that a man knows because man is a kind of thing that knows and has knowledge; another way is the way we have in mind in saying that someone who has grammatical knowledge knows. These knowers have different sorts of potentiality – […] the second has a potentiality because he has the potentiality to attend to something when he wishes, if nothing external prevents it."

include hindering both the transition from potentiality to first actuality, in Aristotle's terminology, and the transition from first to second actuality. In the example I was discussing, then, the child's potential may be restricted either by preventing them from learning how to walk, or by preventing them from exercising their ability to walk, and thus by preventing them from actually *walking*.

The scope of potentiality in a human being, compared to that of other beings, includes a broad variety of aspects: among these are biological/somatic, psychological, emotional, moral, intellectual, social, professional, and other aspects. Human potential, thus, has to do with the *kind of person* one can become and the *kind of life* one can and will have. The outcome concerning these two dimensions of human existence will depend on which aspects (or components) of one's potential will be developed into actuality, in what combination, and to what extent. A key component in Aristotle's account, as I said above, is what we may call its *conditional* element, which is expressed by the phrase "if nothing hinders it."[6] Violence, in the definition I propose, is to be identified precisely with that hindrance, i.e. with the cause of the limitation or impediment of the actualization that brings a human being from state A to state B.

My account, thus, differs from Galtung's in two important ways. The first should be already clear, and has to do with the scope of the notion of violence. The second concerns a qualification he adds to his main definition, namely the fact that for the cause of the difference between potential and actual to count as violence, such difference must have been avoided. Such qualification, in my account, is not relevant to the definition of violence, but only to its ethical

[6] The conditional element, as expressed by Aristotle, seems to imply that there is an almost "naturally" occurring process, which will infallibly lead from potentiality to actuality unless an external factor interferes with it. This, however, seems to apply most distinctly to natural processes, which will take place unless something hinders their regular, standard unfolding. Processes concerning the actualization of the potential of human beings, on the other hand, would seem not to fall under such a straightforward rule, but to be much more variable – as they do not necessarily have a standard unfolding, but tend to be open-ended.

(subsequent) evaluation. I will start by addressing the first difference, which concerns the scope of the notion of violence. Galtung's account emphasizes external hindrances, because he is mainly interested in the impact that the deprivation of material resources and of the pertaining insight have on the realization of human potential, which he understands as "somatic and mental" potential. My view, however, aims at including both a much broader set of causes for the difference between potential and actual – not only material causes – and causes that are internal as well as external. Non-material causes of the restriction of one's potential may include social conditioning and social dynamics in general, prejudice, power differences, and other factors. Internal causes may include the results of internalized conditioning, that is, external conditioning that has been assimilated by the individual and has become part of them, and purely internal causes like natural inclinations or dispositions and other kinds of personal traits that affect one's choices and therefore one's overall development.

The second important point is that my view does not take into account whether the limitation (or impediment) of the actualization of one's potential could have been avoided or not, whereas for Galtung the gap between the potential and the actual level of realization of a human being's potential must have been avoidable in order to be identified as violence. On my account, on the other hand, *all* limitations of potential, all hindrances to its actualization, are instances of violence. The reason for this difference will become clear if we consider that Galtung's account and mine differ in a fundamental way, one that concerns the relation between metaphysics and ethics for the purposes of defining violence. Galtung's definition, as most definitions do, presupposes an ethical judgment: in other words, Galtung sees violence as intrinsically bad and this attribute becomes part of the definition itself. It is part of the nature of violence to be a bad thing, and that is why the same event – the same limitation of potential – can be violent or

nonviolent, according to his account, depending on the circumstances causing that limitation. Adding this qualification enables Galtung to exclude acts, events or circumstances for which no agents can be held responsible – whether the agents are individual human beings or social and economic structures – from the set of violent acts or events. If an event is caused by nature alone, for example, and thus could not be avoided, it cannot be defined as violent even if it importantly restricts the potential of a human being or a set of human beings. Moreover, Galtung's definition of violence seems to disregard the possibility that one could do violence to oneself by restricting the actualization of one's own potential, whereas my account allows for my option as well. The condition Galtung imposes – i.e., that the reduction of potential must be avoidable in order to be violence – associates violence with acts one is forced to endure against their own will – an aspect that is also present in most versions of the physicalist account. This can be explained, again, by the fact that both physicalist accounts and the structural view of violence (whether implicitly or explicitly) move from the assumption that violence is bad, and define it accordingly.[7] In the first chapter I argued that a definition of violence that does not offer us a way to identify an act or an event as violent independent of the moral evaluation is an inadequate definition. To make the task of determining whether an act is violent or not depend on the view we *already* have of that act – that is, on how we judge it, even if that is the most ordinary way to judge it – may be problematic, as it makes the discussion about the definition of violence contingent on the ethical and/or political framework an author subscribes to. I believe, on the contrary, that the ethical aspects of violence require a separate, independent discussion. For example, I observed that

[7] Bufacchi, for example, when discussing the definitions of violence as excessive use of force, says that "violence is an evaluative concept, perhaps even a normative concept, while force is not." See V. Bufacchi, "Two Concepts of Violence," *Political Studies Review* 3 (2005), no. 2: 193-204, here 196. This is, I claim, a widely held but nonetheless a problematic stance. Since the very definition of violence is disputed – unlike, for example, the definition of "murder" – it seems advisable to separate the ontological and the normative planes when discussing violence, at the very least in order to avoid transferring the deficiencies of our ontology to the ethical consideration.

physicalist definitions of violence tend to be functional to politically conservative positions, which refuse to recognize the deprivation of essential material resources or systematic racism as forms of violence and restrict the scope of the concept to acts of (usually unauthorized) physical aggression, whereas an instance of physical injury whose infliction is considered authorized or legitimate is usually not seen as violence but as a consequence of an act of "simple" force, and not of an act of violence. This restriction can in turn support the sanctioning of police violence as legitimate, for example, and the condemnation of acts that are identical as far the mechanics of the acts themselves are concerned, but differ in regard to the agent performing them and the motivations guiding them. Given that the notion of violence is heavily charged both ethically and politically, as I have argued in the first chapter, the moral evaluation of an act should be separated from the description of the nature of such act in order to avoid compromising the conceptual adequacy of the latter (and possibly of the former as well).

Let us now return to the distinction between avoidable and unavoidable restrictions of a person's potential and to the role such distinction plays in the definition of an act as violent. If one follows Galtung's view, to say that the limitation of a person's potential could have been avoided implies that someone could have done something to prevent that limitation from being in place (as produced by social, political, or economic institutions) and thus from interfering with the actualization of that person's potential, or even – taking into account the broad understanding of the notion of action I have proposed in the previous chapter – that they could have done something to facilitate such actualization. Given such broad understanding of action, both the failure to prevent the reduction of someone's potential and the failure to actively support the actualization of that potential count as violent actions. But what about the cases in which the difference between the potential and the actual realization of a human being could not have been

avoided? Do we just dismiss these as unfortunate cases in which one's potential could not be actualized and nothing could be done about that, or do we still consider these instances of reduced or limited human potential as instances of violence done to the individual whose potential has been restricted? The issue here may be more complicated than it seems at first sight, because we need to understand what we mean by "avoidable" in the context of human affairs,[8] where every action is the result of a choice, a decision that is made between multiple options we are presented with at every moment.

Let us consider, for example, Mill's discussion of this problem in *On Liberty*, where he addresses the question of the morality of situations in which an individual's pursuit and achievement of a good or a goal inevitably result in a corresponding loss or deprivation for others, and whether the harm principle should be applied in these cases:

> In many cases, an individual, in pursuing a legitimate object, necessarily and therefore legitimately causes pain or loss to others, or intercepts a good which they had a reasonable hope of obtaining. Such oppositions of interest between individuals often arise from bad social institutions, but are unavoidable while those institutions last; and some would be unavoidable under any institutions. Whoever succeeds in an overcrowded profession or in a competitive examination, whoever is preferred to another in any contest for an object which both desire, reaps benefit from the loss of others, from their wasted exertion and their disappointment. But it is, by common admission, better for the general interest of mankind that persons should pursue their objects undeterred by this sort of consequences.[9]

In situations of the kind Mill is describing, an individual is legitimately trying to achieve a goal or obtain a good; in achieving their goal or obtaining their desired good, however, they deprive others –who had the same goal or an interest in the same object – of the opportunity to satisfy their need or desire. This "opposition of interests" is quite common and concerns both material and non-material goods. According to Mill, the loss others suffer when we legitimately

[8] I add this qualification because different things may be said about non-human matters, like natural events, but I'm not concerned with these here.
[9] J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, in *On Liberty and Other Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989, 94-95.

achieve our goals or obtain some goods is unavoidable, necessary, *and thereby* legitimate. This is a key point, and potentially a problematic one, in the discussion: the very nature of competition for limited resources seems makes it inevitable that some people will be deprived of what they aspire to, and at the same time, as long as the competition is fair and the goals are legitimate ones, Mill believes that such inevitability also makes the deprivation and loss of those who do not succeed in the competition justified.[10] Mill distinguishes two kinds of such inequalities: the ones that are the result of unjust social institutions and the ones that are an inevitable feature of any social institution. In the former case, it would seem that the deprivation of resources or opportunities for some individuals is unjustified, and that making those institutions just would restore a situation of fair distribution of resources and opportunities among all members of a society. However, in the latter case, Mill's view is that (some) inequality in the distribution of resources and opportunities is an inevitable feature of any social institution, and a justified one. In order to illustrate this point, he discusses the example of someone who "succeeds in an overcrowded profession" or in a "competitive examination." If we consider cases in which access to – and not only success in – a profession is limited, then it is quite clear that one individual's ability to exercise that profession (for example, becoming a professor of philosophy) necessarily entails that other individuals will be excluded from it, and will be consequently harmed in a variety of ways. To use the language I introduced in this chapter, their potential will be restricted from their inability to exercise that profession – where such inability is imposed

[10] In other words, as long as it is a zero-sum game, someone will always have to suffer a loss or deprivation from the gain of others. This view presupposes that competition itself is justified as a model for determining the allocation of goods. For Mill, this framework can be justified on utilitarian grounds, that is, "for the general interest of mankind." Although such a discussion is beyond the scope of the present inquiry, it is worth noticing that one may wonder if there is a *different* framework we could choose in order to decide on the allocation of goods, which would not impose a loss on some individuals for the benefit of others. A possible way to look at this would be to imagine that, instead of *competition*, we may have forms of *collaboration* between the members of society, and a *sharing* of resources and opportunities in a communal way.

from the outside.[11] Another example of this dynamic is economic competition, whereby the profit some individuals gain inevitably produces losses (and thus harm) for others. For Mill, however, these are all instances of justified harm. The argument here is a utilitarian one: the harm principle does not apply – and thus, society cannot restrain individual conduct in order to protect others from harm – because society as a whole will benefit if we allow economic competition to harm some individuals or professional competition to exclude or limit the success of others. In both cases competition will select for the best prices and for the best professionals. Overall – that is, in terms of aggregate utility[12] – the outcome of the process will benefit society, or most of its members. In order to preserve the harm principle, which protects individuals from society's interference with their goals, Mill argues that protecting the interest of society as a whole is a more important goal than protecting some individuals from the harm they suffer when they are deprived of resources or opportunities.

To summarize, Mill believes that some harm is unavoidable, but justified for society's greater good. In his view (and *mutatis mutandis* in Galtung's view) a deprivation of resources or limitation of potential for an individual is justified (or does not count as violence) if it is unavoidable. What seems most problematic about this account is that it is not clear what it means to say that circumstances that are the result of human actions are unavoidable. When we say that the limitation of one's potential could have been avoided, we usually mean that the circumstances could have been otherwise, that is, that the gap between the potential and the actual realization of an individual could have been prevented by eliminating the obstacles

[11] This would be precisely the "conditional element" we saw in Aristotle: the potential will be actualized "if nothing hinders it."

[12] Please note that this is a quantitative criterion, which – as is known – treats all individuals and their needs or desires on a par, and does not say anything on the nature of those needs or desires, nor evaluates them. I will explore a different way of taking "the whole" into account in the next chapter, and this will involve trying to think of a *qualitative* criterion for the maximization of welfare, happiness, or flourishing.

impeding the actualization of the individual's potential or by actively facilitating such actualization. When we say that the limitation of one's potential was unavoidable, on the contrary, we mean that the circumstances could *not* have been otherwise: to recall the examples I discussed in the context of structural violence, typical instances of unavoidable events are natural events, as long as they are out of our control. In general, an unavoidable event can be said to be one whose occurrence we do not have the power to prevent. However, in the context of human affairs – insofar as they are characterized precisely by the human ability to make choices – there is no such thing as an unavoidable event, and therefore no such thing as an unavoidable restriction of human potential. It would seem, then, that this feature cannot be meaningfully included in the definition of violence, but it should rather (if ever) be thematized within a subsequent and independent discussion of the ethics of violence.

The *harm* constituted by the restriction of one's potential is central to my definition of violence – whereas other accounts define violence on the basis of an evaluation of the cause of the restriction, that is, whether it was justifiable, legitimate, unavoidable. If the restriction of one's potential was unjustified, then such restriction can be seen as violence; if the same restriction was justified, then the act that restricts the potential is not a violent act. The source of the difference, again, lies in the relation between the ontological and the ethical plane of the discourse. My definition keeps these two planes distinct, and focuses on the ontology of violence alone: violence is a *deprivation*, whether it was unavoidable or not, whether it is a good, justified, legitimate deprivation or not. Violence, as a consequence, is in fact *negative* by definition, but it is such only in the descriptive, ontological sense. The value judgment pertaining to such deprivation is part of a separate task, to be carried out once the nature of violence itself has been clarified: only in that context will the question whether the deprivation is justified, legitimate,

necessary, etc. become relevant, and will make a difference in terms of the moral judgment we will formulate in regard to it.

To summarize my conclusion, then, we will say that every instance in which the actualization of one's potential is restricted is an instance of violence done to that individual, independent of the cause of the restriction and of our evaluation of such cause. On my view, violence is *any* action or interaction that results in the limitation of one's potential, and is morally neutral. This, to be clear, does not make the ethical discussion about violence less complex: on the contrary, I believe that all restrictions of the human potential may be regarded as giving rise to a "crowd" of un-actualized potentials that demand a justification.[13] Now that I have started unpacking the definition of violence as limitation of the potential, and before we proceed in its discussion, it is necessary to explain what exactly the potential of a human being consists of. In addition to adding detail and content to my definition of violence, the next section will address a question that was left unanswered at the end of the previous chapter, namely what is the subject we have in mind when we talk about forms of structural violence that limit one's ability to even be a subject, or to be recognized as a human being.

2. *Potentiality and Capabilities*

2.1 *The Capabilities Approach*

According to the definition I presented above, violence is the defining trait of an act or interaction that limits or reduces the actualization of one's potential, and the potential of a human being is to be understood in a broad sense, ranging from somatic to relational and intellectual aspects. A clearer and more detailed articulation of the content of this concept of human potential

[13] Providing the tools and the criteria for such task will be the aim of the next chapter.

and of its implications, however, is in order. An influential and, I believe, promising attempt to develop this concept into a comprehensive theory is the capabilities approach, pioneered by Amartya Sen and developed, among others, by Martha Nussbaum.[14] Some aspects of this approach can be traced back to Aristotle and Marx.[15] For Nussbaum, Aristotle's philosophy can provide a useful set of conceptual tools for feminist theory and, as a result, for theories of well-being and human development. This is the case, in part, because Aristotle's philosophy takes into account "the material conditions necessary for truly human functioning,"[16] which include, among other things, food, shelter, and medical care, as well as education, employment, and citizenship. Aristotle's philosophy, in her view, constitutes an important resource for scholars that aim to overcome some of the limitations intrinsic to liberalism; among such limitations is, for instance, the separation and opposition of rationality and emotion, which Aristotle counteracts by emphasizing the importance of an appropriate relation to our emotions and feelings. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he claims that emotions play a key role in the virtuous individual's life: the lack of the emotions appropriate to specific situations and the failure to deal with them in the appropriate way, in fact, constitutes a vice. In addition, his philosophy makes room for both the individual development of human beings and for the communal dimension of life. This means that the social network in which our individual lives are embedded plays a crucial role for the achievement of a good life. Here, Nussbaum refers in particular to the discussion of concord in

[14] For an introduction to the capabilities approach, see (among others), A. Sen, *Commodities and Capabilities,* Amsterdam: North-Holland 1985; A. Sen, "The Standard of Living," in Sen, Muellbauer, Kanbur, Hart, and Williams, *The Standard of Living: The Tanner Lectures on Human Values,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987; M. Nussbaum and A. Sen (eds.), *The Quality of Life,* Oxford: Clarendon Press 1993; M. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001; Ead., *Creating Capabilities*. Harvard University Press 2011; H. Brighouse and I. Robeyns (eds.), *Measuring Justice: Primary Goods and Capabilities*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010.

[15] Regarding the latter, see in particular his discussion of alienated labor and of the particular human functions whose exercise it hinders in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, in K. Marx, F. Engels, *Collected Works*, New York: International Publishers 1975, vol. III: 270-282.

[16] M. Nussbaum, "Aristotle, Feminism, and Needs for Functioning," *Texas Law Review* 70 (1992): 1019-1028, here 1019.

the *Nicomachean Ethics*[17] and to the definition of the human being as a political animal in the *Politics*.[18] The Aristotelian framework thus provides the conceptual resources for a comprehensive view of human functioning, one that includes the development of physical, emotional, and rational capacities, an awareness of the material conditions of existence and of the importance of relationality and sociality in human life, and an understanding of human flourishing as the actualization of human capacities.[19]

On the basis of this framework, the capabilities approach addresses issues of social justice and provides a criterion for the assessment of the quality of life that differs from traditional ones like the measurement of GDP or GNP. The quality of life, according to Sen's and Nussbaum's proposal, is to be assessed by the extent to which a social arrangement ensures the development of human capabilities and therefore the ability of its members to function. Two main ideas are at the core of this approach: the first is that there are certain functions that are crucial to human life, in the sense that we can tell whether a person is living a human life on the basis of the presence or absence of such functions. The second idea is that there is something that it is to perform these functions in a "truly human" way.[20] Given these premises, Nussbaum provides a list of

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[17] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155 a 15-27.
[18] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253 a 2-18.
[19] "[Aristotle] knows that a flourishing life requires activity and that it is possible to be prevented from acting well by hunger, illness, injury, loss of political rights, enslavement, or torture. He knows, too, that the flourishing life requires friends and loved ones, and that it is possible for a good person to lose these to death, distance, or betrayal. He therefore places great emphasis on the role of society in distributing these things. Political distribution comes to play a deep role in human life that it could not play in the Socratic-Stoic view: for the things that politics distributes are not just extras, they are things that are really necessary for *eudaimonia* (flourishing life)." Nussbaum, "Aristotle, Feminism, and Needs for Functioning," 1025.
[20] This aspect of the theory, in particular, has been heavily influenced by Marx and his account of alienation. Alienation reduces human beings to their animal functions, and leaves them with the ability to feel free only in that sphere. Marx recognizes that nutrition, procreation, etc. are genuinely human functions, but he also says that "taken abstractly, separated from the sphere of all other human activity and turned into sole and ultimate ends, they are animal functions." See https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm (retrieved on March 19, 2016). Nussbaum compares humans and animals in order to make this point. This, however, is not meant to despise animal life, but rather to emphasize that there are some specifically human functions that are different from (or exceed) animal functions. See M. Nussbaum, "Capabilities and Social Justice," *International Studies Review* 4 (2002), no. 2: 123-135, here 131: "If a turtle were given a life that afforded a merely animal level of

capabilities, the full development of which ensures that each individual is treated as "worthy of regard" and is "in a position to live really humanly."[21]

2.2. *The Contribution of the Capabilities Approach to a Theory of Violence*

The capabilities approach has interesting implications concerning theories of justice, feminist theory, environmental ethics, and a variety of other areas. For the purposes of my theory of violence, however, three features of this approach are particularly relevant: the first is its emphasis on capabilities and not on functioning; the second is the normative character of the concept of capability; the third is that this account provides an indication about the content of the notion of subjectivity, a question I left unanswered at the end of the previous chapter. As one can see, these are mostly conceptual aspects of the capabilities approach, which is primarily a political-philosophical approach that aims to address concrete issues of justice and inequality. In this context, thus, I deal with this approach insofar as it provides useful conceptual tools to my theory of violence.[22]

Nussbaum emphasizes that the capabilities approach focuses on capabilities and not on functioning as the goal of political action in order to preserve practical reason "as a good that both suffuses all the other functions, making them fully human, and also figures, itself, as a central function on the list."[23] Specifically, by "practical reason" Nussbaum understands the

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functioning, we would have no indignation, no sense of waste and tragedy. When a human being is given a life that blights powers of human action and expression, that does give a sense of waste and tragedy."

[21] Ibid., 130. See also Nussbaum, "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice," *Feminist Economics* 9 (2003), no. 2-3: 33-59. The latter piece includes a detailed list of capabilities, which range from bodily health and bodily integrity to affiliation and play. Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have different views on how to proceed how we select and justify which capabilities should be included in the list. Sen believes they should be left to a process of democratic deliberation, whereas Nussbaum holds that philosophical theory should establish the list of capabilities. For a critical discussion of the two views see R. Claassen, "Making Capability Lists: Philosophy versus Democracy," *Political Studies* 59 (2011): 491-508.

[22] This also means that I do not commit to other specific aspects of this theory, unless I specify otherwise.

[23] Nussbaum, "Capabilities and Social Justice," 132.

capacity "to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life," which also includes liberty of conscience and religious observance.[24] What this means is that the really crucial element for the capabilities approach is the ability to perform a function, and not the actual performance of that function. The emphasis on capability rather than on the actual exercise of the capability constitutes an important point for the purpose of the discussion of the concept of potential within my account, because it provides the opportunity to clarify what it means to say that the actualization of a human being's potential can be reduced or thwarted. I define violence as the feature of an act or interaction that prevents the (full or partial) actualization of a human being's potential.

Nussbaum believes that the central concept, in the context of a political-philosophical discussion, must be that of capability. This choice serves two related goals: the first originates from the fact that the capabilities approach purports to address issues of global justice, equality, and well-being, and thus wants to be able to speak (and to be applied) to a variety of cultural and political contexts, within which different societies and different individuals must be able to determine in a more detailed way the "content" of these capabilities. The idea, thus, is to avoid the objection that the capabilities approach proposes a Westernized approach to these issues, at the same time identifying – giving the rather specific list of capabilities that Nussbaum provides – a series of *conditions* each society must satisfy in order to be regarded as a just society. This aspect creates a tension within the capabilities approach: Amartya Sen, for example, refuses to specify *which* capabilities should be developed in each society and claims that these should be determined on the basis of a process of democratic deliberation.[25] At the same time, if the

[24] Nussbaum, "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements," 41.
[25] One could observe that the very idea of democratic deliberation presupposes that a variety of capabilities are developed and can be exercised effectively, and therefore, that the application of the capabilities approach seems to require a specification of the content of the capabilities themselves.

capabilities approach has to be concrete and applicable – as its defenders would like it to be – it is necessary to specify its content, and it would be impossible to think one can offer "neutral" values[26] with respect to which one could measure the ability of each society to ensure the development of its members' capabilities. The second goal that the emphasis on capabilities rather than functioning is supposed to help achieve is to avoid an excess of normativity concerning the way in which individuals decide to lead their lives, but to leave enough room for each individual to make their own choices about the "if" and the "how" regarding the exercise of their capabilities.

This debate is only partially relevant to the purposes of my account of violence. The main reason why the capabilities approach is interesting for my account is that it provides the conceptual tools that can help specify the content of the concept of human potential and the notion of subjectivity I refer to within my account. In this sense, thus, the reason why it is interesting to focus on the relation between the notion of capability and the idea of the actual exercise of such capability is that it enables us to explore more in detail the very notion of potentiality and the space of the transition from potentiality to actuality as the space in which violence takes place, when such transition is blocked or hindered. If we refer, once again, to Aristotle's terminology, what Nussbaum calls "capability" is what Aristotle would call first actuality (or, sometimes, second potentiality), namely the acquisition of the actual capacity "to do x." Potentiality as such, for Aristotle, is the "potentiality to do x" that is proper to the kind of being that can do x, and thus is prior to the actual ability to do x. In order to illustrate this point, the potentiality to become an apple tree is *only* of apple seeds, and not of pumpkin seeds. The potentiality to develop and maintain social relations is of some non-human animals and of human

[26] By "neutral" I mean non-cultural-specific.

beings, but neither of apple seeds, nor of pumpkin seeds. First actuality – Nussbaum's capability – is constituted by the acquisition of the actual ability to develop social relations, or, just to make another example of one of the capabilities she lists, to be adequately nourished. To this end, it is necessary that some specific conditions be satisfied: once these are in place, the individual can achieve the second actuality, and thus to the actual exercise of that capability, for example by interacting or developing bonds and friendships with other human beings or by feeding herself.

For the purposes of a theory of violence, therefore, we ought to ask what is the actualization we are talking about when we talk about its limitation as the defining feature of violence. In partial agreement with Nussbaum, I believe that the development of capabilities in the sense of Aristotle's first actuality should be the first and fundamental sense of the notion of actualization of potential. Consequently, the primary violence is that preventing a human being (or that through which a human being prevents herself) from developing a variety of capabilities that are specific to their nature, where such development is a necessary condition, although not a sufficient one, for the exercise of those "truly human functions" I mentioned above. At the same time, and this time in agreement with Clark, I believe that at least conceptually[27] it would be important to emphasize equally the second actuality, which Nussbaum calls "functioning."[28]

[27] From the point of view of political philosophy and of the debate on global justice, however, I understand the reasons why Nussbaum prefers to emphasize capability – provided that her account does not neglect the importance of the actual exercise of capabilities.

[28] John Clark holds that actual functioning should be emphasized much more, at least for the purposes of getting evidence for the existence of a capability. For example, when discussing the capability to participate in political choices, he observes that the failure to exercise one's ability to "participate effectively" might produce an unjust political system, since the decision making could be *de facto* dominated by a minority: "It would seem […] that one of the primary sources of evidence for the existence of an ability to participate, not merely hypothetically but rather 'effectively,' would be the actualization of the capability as a potential – the putting into *effect* or precisely what Nussbaum calls 'functioning'." J. Clark, "Capabilities Theory and the Limits of Liberal Justice: On Nussbaum's *Frontiers of Justice*," *Human Rights Review* 10 (2009): 583-604, here 590-591. This point may also be addressed by referring to Aristotle's claim of the priority of actuality *in time*, whereby the existence of a potentiality can only be determined backwards, that is, from the standpoint of the achieved actuality.

The second reason why the capabilities approach is relevant for a theory of violence based on the notion of potential is that it holds that the human potential is *normative*. According to Nussbaum,

> Human capabilities exert a claim that they should be developed. Human beings are creatures such that, provided with the right educational and material support, they can become fully capable of these human functions.[29]

In the context of her presentation of the capabilities approach, this means that the notion of capability comes with a *claim*, with a demand that each capability be developed. For Nussbaum, capabilities can be understood as freedoms or rights: if we believe that each human being is worthy of regard, and thus has dignity, then such dignity can only be respected and recognized by ensuring that each human being has the opportunity to exercise their functions. This, in turn, translates into a set of entitlements, which correspond to the list of capabilities. In addition, as she explains, we can distinguish lower and higher capabilities, for example bodily integrity and practical reason. The former kind of capability is a necessary condition for the development of the latter kind, and so it is imperative that certain needs for human functioning be satisfied in order to allow for the higher capabilities to be developed.

Given that the capabilities approach is aimed at making an intervention in political theory, and it is a practical approach – one that can be translated into practice – the normativity Nussbaum has in mind is a specifically ethico-political one. What is interesting for my purpose of defining the notion of potentiality, however, is that the normativity of the potential can be regarded as being prior to, and independent from, any consideration of ethical or political

[29] "Capabilities and Social Justice," 131.

normativity.[30] The kind of normativity I am referring to, in other words, is an ontological normativity rather than a moral or political one. Again, Aristotle can help clarify this point: a being is fully actualized when it exercises its function (*ergon*): this means that in order to say that a thing is actually the thing it is (supposed to be), it must be exercising its proper function (at least in the sense of the first actuality). The actualization of the potential thus seems to entail an ontological normativity: in order to say that a human life is lived in a fully human way, thus, such life must include the actualization of the human potential, i.e. the exercise of specifically human functions. The list of capabilities Nussbaum provides offers a way to further articulate what these specifically human functions amount to.[31]

The third reason why the capabilities approach can be useful for a theory of violence is that, although such approach does not explicitly commit to a theory of subjectivity, it does offer the tools for an articulation of the content of such theory. The understanding of the subject that emerges from the capabilities approach seems to distance itself in an important way from the view of subjectivity that can be said to have been dominant since modernity, and that according to some can be traced back to Descartes and, later, to the Enlightenment.[32] On this view, the subject is generally regarded as a self-contained being, that is, as a free, autonomous, rational being. This entails, on the one hand, an emphasis on the self as the origin of all experience and

[30] For an approach that explicitly connects natural normativity and ethical normativity, see P. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2001.
[31] See the Appendix for the complete list of capabilities.
[32] Given the nature of the present discussion, I will make generalizations that might seem problematic to some. My purpose here, however, is to outline a "model" of subjectivity and to contrast it with the one emerging from the capabilities approach, rather than to provide a detailed historical account of the development of this notion in different authors, who, obviously, understood the self and the subject in different ways, although they are here discussed under the same label. For a general introduction to the concept of subjectivity and to a variety of theories about it, see N. Mansfield, *Subjectivity. Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway*, St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin 2000. For a discussion of the Cartesian model of subjectivity and of its problematic implications, and a proposal of a different approach, see E. Bencivenga, *The Discipline of Subjectivity. An Essay on Montaigne*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1990, and Id., *Oltre la tolleranza. Per una proposta politica esigente* (*Beyond Tolerance. For a Demanding Political Proposal*), Milan: Feltrinelli 1992.

knowledge; on rationality as the ground of all knowledge; and on the subject's will (as informed by rationality) as the source and ground of action. On the other hand, the individual is viewed as a "naturally occurring unit,"[33] thus as independent from the community and more generally from the interaction with other individuals. The relational and social aspects of an individual's life, as a consequence, are not understood as foundational for the constitution of the subject: on the contrary, they are often seen as a potential threat to the individual's autonomy and freedom.

Within the framework constituted by such an understanding of subjectivity, many of the things I have described as examples of violence in the previous chapters would not count as violations with respect to subjectivity, and would definitely not be seen as being able to disrupt or compromise the core of subjectivity itself. For example, if we understand the subject as self-contained and independent, for its constitution, from its ties to other individuals, then the "natal alienation" and "general dishonor" described by Patterson as constituent elements of Slaveness would not have the same weight they have for a conception of subjectivity that considers "emotions" and "affiliation" as one of the constituent, essential elements of subjectivity. The conception of subjectivity emerging from the capabilities approach, on the contrary, includes a variety of aspects that can account for the broad view of violence I am proposing and that explain why actions or interactions preventing a human being from (fully) developing their potential to exercise their human functions in a "truly human way" should be understood as violent and specifically as violating, in some cases, the core of subjectivity.

If we look at the list of capabilities proposed by Nussbaum, for example, there are two in particular that can help understand this point, in particular as it relates to the examples I just

[33] Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, 18.

mentioned. The fifth capability – which follows "Life," "Bodily Health," "Bodily Integrity," and "Senses, Imagination, and Thought" – is given the general title of "Emotions" and is described as

> Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development).[34]

The seventh capability is "Affiliation" and is defined as

> A. Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and to show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.
> B. Having the social bases of respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of nondiscrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin.[35]

Under "emotions," the feelings we develop towards other people – one could imagine their family members to begin with – and the ability to develop one's emotions in a reasonably healthy way (the requirement Nussbaum includes that it be not "blighted by fear and anxiety" seems pretty minimal, and at the same time it is practically quite demanding), which depend in an essential way from our interactions with others, are given central attention. Under "affiliation," even more explicitly, the capacity to live in interconnection with others and to engage in a variety of interactions with them, as well as being treated – within this system of interconnections – with respect and recognition of one's dignity, constitute a unitary capability whose development, according to Nussbaum, must be ensured by any just social arrangement. For the purposes of my theory of violence, the content of these capabilities, considered as a

[34] Nussbaum, "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements," 41.
[35] Ibid.

whole, constitutes the content of human potential, and any action or interaction that limits or reduces (or prevents entirely) the actualization of such potential – whether in the sense of the first actuality or of the second one or in both senses – is a violent action or interaction.

2.3 *Tensions with Liberalism*

While Nussbaum's version of the capabilities approach provides useful insights into the notion of potential and of subjectivity, it is necessary to observe that such approach is characterized by an important tension. The reason for such tension is that the theoretical framework within which she moves is still a liberal one: as such, it is part of a tradition that shares a view of the subject as the fundamental unit of our social and political structures, a unit that is prior to these structures and whose autonomy from these structures has to be preserved and protected from any "outside" interference. On the one hand, Nussbaum presents an important critique of some aspects of liberalism and of its view of the subject, but on the other hand, as it has been observed, her approach is unable to overcome some of the most problematic aspects of liberalism itself.[36] In articulating and defending the capabilities approach, she critically discusses competing approaches to the assessment of the quality of life, including those based on the measurement of the resources available to individuals or populations and preference-based approaches. Among these, she devotes particular attention to the human rights approach, as it is the probably the most similar to the capabilities approach: at the same time, however, it has several shortcomings that are precisely the result of the liberal ideology they originated from. Among the advantages of the human rights discourse, according to Nussbaum, is that it provides the conceptual tools to talk about inequalities and to ensure that women are

[36] See for example J. Clark, "Capabilities Theory and the Limits of Liberal Justice."

recognized as full human beings.[37] Moreover, women's demands, if articulated in the language of rights, can be linked to the demands of previously subordinated groups, thereby strengthening their political claims. Two more advantages Nussbaum emphasizes about the human rights discourse are the emphasis on people's choice and autonomy and the fact that rights are typically understood as involving a claim, that is, the demand to be treated in certain ways. The capabilities approach, for Nussbaum, has all of the advantages of the human rights approach, while at the same time avoiding the important shortcomings of such approach.

Nussbaum lists four main issues with the human rights discourse. Besides to the fact that the language and theoretical framework of human rights are "intellectually contested,"[38] the main problems with the human rights approach can be traced back to the liberal tradition from which it originated. First, the language of rights has traditionally been associated with political and civil liberties, and only more recently with economic and social entitlements.[39] However, these two aspects are fundamentally intertwined, since – Nussbaum argues – political and civil liberties cannot be really exercised if certain conditions (both material and non-material, ranging from the access to basic resources to education), which are ensured by social and economic rights, are not satisfied. The separation of these two kinds of rights is importantly connected with the idea of negative freedom, typical of liberalism, and thus with the idea that rights are designed to protect the individual – understood as a free and self-sufficient unit – from the intervention or interference of the state. Finally, Nussbaum subscribes to another frequent criticism of liberalism

[37] As I observed in the previous chapter, many feminist critics would disagree precisely on this point in their assessment the of human rights discourse: they emphasize that liberalism proposed human rights as applying to all human beings, while at the same time excluding entire groups of human beings, primarily women and people of color.

[38] There are disagreements, for example, about what rights are, what it means to have a right, positive and negative interpretations of the meaning of rights and of the corresponding duties, whether groups have rights, and a variety of other issues. Given this lack of clarity and agreement, Nussbaum thinks the human rights approach is not entirely effective.

[39] See Nussbaum, "Capabilities and Social Justice," 128.

and rights discourse, one that has been presented with particular strength by feminist scholars and activists, namely the separation between private and public sphere and the exclusive recognition of the latter as an appropriate area of intervention by the state. This has determined the neglect of various issues of justice within the family as politically relevant issues – including, among other issues, domestic violence, the distribution of resources within the family, and the recognition of women's work in the house as work. Nussbaum recognizes all of these aspects as problematic in the human rights discourse and therefore in liberal political thought.[40] In particular, these problematic aspects can be traced back to the liberal conception of the subject, to which the capabilities approach opposes a "political conception of the person" that

> [V]iews the person, with Aristotle, as a political and social animal, who seeks a good that is social through and through, and who shares complex ends with others, at many levels. The good of others is not just a constraint on this person's pursuit of her own good; it is part of her own good.[41]

Once the person is understood as being political by definition, it becomes very hard to hold fast to a political framework that distinguishes the personal (i.e. private) dimension of existence and the political one. At the same time, however, Nussbaum's theory *is* a version of liberalism: she does not call into question the liberal framework itself but explicitly support it, and tries to make the changes that she believes will fix such framework. However, if taken seriously, the capabilities approach poses a great deal of problems to liberal political philosophy and to the economic system it supports, so it is not clear why this political and economic framework should be kept as the main reference for the capabilities approach. More specifically, it seems hard to prove that if we apply the capabilities approach to the economic and political structures currently

[40] Her critique of Rawls' contractarianism is also interesting in this respect, but it goes beyond the purposes of the present discussion, so I will not address it here. Readers can refer, among others, to M. Nussbaum's *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Harvard: Harvard University Press 2006, esp. the first two chapters.
[41] Nussbaum, Frontiers of Justice, 158.

in place, they will not be completely transfigured, to the point of becoming entirely different economic and political structures – and this involves the very structure of the nation-state, neoliberal capitalism, globalization, etc.[42] In my view, Nussbaum fails to prove that these structures are not *inherently* flawed precisely insofar as they are built on a specific conception of the individual and of its relationship with the state – a conception she opposes, while refusing to fully explore the implications of her own view. As a consequence, Nussbaum believes we could maintain the current economic and political institutions, and that we just need to make them more just by applying the capabilities approach: this implies, for her, that we should demand that these social, economic, and political institutions adopt the development of human capabilities as their goal.[43] This, however, seems to be an idealistic move at the very least.[44] It is quite disappointing to notice that she fails discuss the hypothesis that some of these structures and institutions have goals that are clearly in conflict with the goals of the capabilities approach, and that some of them, actually, are responsible for various and serious forms of injustice.

A full discussion of these tensions is beyond the scope of the present discussion, as it mostly concerns the practical implications (and the application) of the view itself, but it is

[42] For an insight into Nussbaum's view on this point, see her "Ten Principles for the Global Structure," in *Frontiers of Justice*, 315-324 and the previous sections of the same chapter on global institutions. See also her "Beyond the Social Contract: Capabilities and Global Justice," *Oxford Development Studies* 32 (2004), no. 1: 3-18.

[43] For example, she writes: "the institutional structure at the global level ought to remain thin and decentralized. Part of it will consist, quite simply, of the domestic basic structures, to which we shall assign responsibilities for redistributing some of their wealth to other nations. Part of it will consist of multinational corporations, to whom we shall assign certain responsibilities for promoting human capabilities in the nations in which they do business. Part of it will consist of global economic policies, agencies and agreements, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, various trade agreements, and so forth. Part will consist of other international bodies, such as the United Nations, the International Labor Organization, the World Court and the envisaged new world criminal court, and of international agreements in many areas" ("Beyond the Social Contract," 15).

[44] For a more detailed discussion of this aspect of Nussbaum's theory see Clark, "Capabilities Theory and the Limits of Liberal Justice," esp. 594-600. He observes, for example: "[s]uch corporate beneficence would no doubt be applauded by many (though with the exception of those who hold Milton Friedman's view that such disinterested activity violates management's strict fiduciary responsibility to the stockholders to maximize return on investment). […]. The managers and the lawyers [of these corporations] (whether or not they are Friedmanites on the nature of corporate moral responsibility) are unlikely to do what they 'should' do, as opposed to what their job descriptions and the corporate ethos require them to do. Indeed, were they to act instead out of disinterested good will or out of faith in Nussbaum's theory that beneficent activity is necessarily in the interest of the company, they would, in a great many cases, lose their jobs and have to take their benevolence elsewhere" (599-600).

important to be aware of them in using some of the insights that the capabilities approach has to offer. For the purposes of a theory of violence, as I said above, this approach remains useful insofar as it offers the conceptual tools to specify the content of the notion of human potentiality, its particular normativity, and the notion of subjectivity that emerges from the conception of potentiality.

3. *Advantages and Problematic Implications of the Account of Violence as Limitation of Potential.*

3.1 *Advantages*

Before I proceed to the discussion of the advantages of, and objections to, my account of violence, let us recapitulate the steps of my argument so far. My account defines violence as the cause of one's incapacitation, understood as the limitation of the actualization of one's potential, that is, of one's capabilities understood as including a broad variety of aspects concerning the well-being of an individual. More specifically, violence is the feature of an act or interaction that causes the impairment of one's capabilities, or one's ability to function in a way that is "truly human," and therefore one's ability to be or to do what they need and/or choose to be and to do.

The main advantage of my account is that it has a flexible conceptual structure: in this way, it enables us to show that all the forms of violence we examined in the course of this study, however apparently unrelated and entirely different from one another – and therefore, apparently irreconcilable on the basis of a rigid, analytic definition – can become just as many chapters of a story, just as many moments within an apparently chaotic unfolding whose exploration, however, shows that there is a unitary thread keeping them together. This means that my account is capable of explaining what legitimates the use of the same term to characterize events that seem as different as: punching someone in the nose; the subtle psychological manipulation aimed at

obfuscating someone's perception so that they lose confidence in their own clarity of mind and can be maneuvered more easily; telling a female student they should not choose to major in mechanical engineering (or philosophy, for that matter), as those are things for which a man's brain is needed; the greater likelihood that a Black person will be pulled over by the police, or harassed by them – or shot at the age of 17, like Trayvon Martin (or 32, or 45: you choose); the act of requesting a blank letter of resignation from a woman, at the very moment she is hired, to be completed just in case she becomes pregnant; the complications one has to go through in order to be able to exercise their right to vote, because the state now requires to present one's I.D. in order to be able to vote and made it very difficult to obtain an I.D.; the inability to access clean water. On my account, we can make sense of these acts or circumstances within a story that explains how human beings can be violated and shows how this can be done in a variety of ways.

With respect to the other views I have discussed up to this point, I believe that my account is preferable because it does not restrict the scope of violence to, nor is it based on, a specific form or kind of violence, and thus does not encounter the limitations the other accounts encounter when they try to make clear-cut, analytic distinctions between what counts as violence and what does not.[45] In addition, even if it is flexible, it is not general in the sense that it simply groups many different kinds of violence together, but allows for specificity. The reference to the capability approach, in fact, serves this precise purpose: it integrates the conceptual structure of my definition – violence as the reduction of one's potential – with a detailed account of human potential and its main aspects. In this way, my account provides the means to explain all of the ways in which we talk about violence – physical, psychological, verbal, symbolic, structural,

[45] See for example the first chapter and my critique of the physicalist view.

ontological, and other kinds of violence – and at the same time it shows how they can be differentiated.

To illustrate this point, let us consider an example of physical violence, where someone breaks my leg. It should be easy to see how an act of physical violence can be explained through my account: while the physicalist account would say that there is violence because there has been an act of force (specifically, an excessive or vigorous one, as some authors emphasize[46]) that caused harm or injury, my account *specifies* that the harm is constituted not only by the materiality of the broken bone and the physical pain I feel, but also, importantly, by the inability to use that leg and to do all the things I would do if my leg was not broken, but healthy and functioning. I could walk, run, dance, join my friends somewhere, play volleyball, ski, help someone move, independently reach my office, and do a variety of other things that I am now unable to do because of that broken bone (and the pain I feel). The harm characterizing the breaking of a person's leg, thus, corresponds to the hindering of that person's ability to actualize their potential – in this case, the potential for bodily integrity but also higher capabilities requiring bodily integrity as a condition for their actualization – and therefore to be and to do what they choose to be or to do. This is, I believe, what underlies all the different ways in which we talk about violence: and my account is general enough to be applied broadly, but specific enough that it also allows us to be very specific and to differentiate different forms of violence. In the remaining part of this section, I discuss some implications and objections to my view, and address some of them by providing a new formulation for my definition of violence.

[46] See for example Audi, "On the Meaning and Justification of Violence."

3.2 *Some Problematic Implications and Objections to my Account*

In what follows, I will discuss three main implications of my account and, specifically, of the way I have characterized the idea of human potential. The first is that the actualization of one's potential implies a limitation of others' freedom, at least concerning their freedom to interfere with such actualization. The second, and related, implication is that the actualization of one's potential requires some conditions to be in place, including time, space, and a variety of resources. But since all potentials require some of these conditions, it is often the case that access to or use of these resources raises conflicts. The third implication is that, since human beings can develop in a variety of directions in each area of their lives, the inevitable choices they make entail that some of those directions will not be pursued, that is, that some of these potentials will not be actualized. The conjunction of these implications leads to a conclusion that may be unsettling for some, namely that it is impossible to actualize all potentials, and it is very rare that a potential will be fully actualized. But since I defined violence as (the cause of) the restriction of the potential, then it seems to follow that violence is everywhere, in everything we do, ad in everything that others do to us, and so is inescapable. Before I discuss the conclusion, however, let us analyze each implication in some more detail.

The first implication of my view, as I said, is the following: since the potential is normative, and therefore includes a claim that it should be actualized, it seems that the freedom of others should be limited accordingly. At the very least, the freedom I am talking about is the freedom to interfere with the actualization of one's potential, as Nussbaum also observes.[47] However, even if we restricted the scope of the limitation to this particular freedom, this would not guarantee that in this way others' ability to develop their own potential will not be restricted, especially if that

[47] Nussbaum, "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements," 44.

involves some sort of conflict between the actualization of different potentials. This will become clearer shortly, when I discuss the second implication. In addition to the freedom of others, it seems that also one's own freedom may be limited in relation to the actualization of one's own potential. For example, if I am working very intensively on the development of my own professional potential, which requires much discipline and time, I may have to (or just *happen* to) sacrifice the actualization of other aspects of my individual potential, ranging from my bodily health – for example, I may not get enough sleep because I work until late – to my social relations – for example, I may not be cultivating my friendships in the best possible way because I am unable to (or decide not to) make time for meeting with my friends. Things, of course, may work in the opposite direction as well: I may limit the development of my professional potential because I am not able (or willing) to restrict the actualization of my potential in other areas, and devote more time to sleep and activities that make me feel healthy and well, and to the cultivation of my relationships. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is definitely something to be taken into account in the analysis of my account of violence. In any case, this first implication seems to suggest that it may (*simply*) not be possible to actualize all of one's potential(s) or everybody's potential: we will see where this takes us, when combined with the two implications that follow.

The second point is that the actualization of one's potential does not take place in a void, but requires a set of conditions to be in place, including space, time, resources of various kinds, an appropriate context, etc. There are, therefore, multiple ways in which the actualization of one's potential may be limited by the unavailability or inaccessibility of the resources one needs and by the absence of some or all of the required conditions in a given context. Moreover, these conditions may be also needed by other individuals for the actualization of their own potential,

and this may place several potentials in conflict with each other for their actualization. The actualization of one's potential, thus, seems to imply – and to require – that another's potential will be restricted or altogether suppressed: the space and time one takes, the resources one uses, are space, time, and resources that other individuals will be unable to access and to use for the actualization of their own potential. For example, in order for me to enjoy the lifestyle I am able to enjoy, to be a graduate student at a university in a Western country (or as a consequence of this), someone else in a different part of the country or of the world will have to live a very different, more disadvantaged life, often lacking even the basic resources for survival, let alone for flourishing. One's freedom to do anything seems to always already imply the limitation of others' freedom, of which the ability to develop one's potential is a crucial component. Also in this case, then, it seems that no potential can be fully actualized: if we consider the current social and economic arrangement of our world, it would seem that some potentials (some of which can be identified with some of the very basic capabilities listed by Nussbaum, for example) actually have to be altogether suppressed in order for other potentials to be actualized. This clearly poses an ethical question concerning how to address these conflicts, which is going to be the primary question I will try to answer in the next chapter.

The third implication of my account is related to an aspect of the first implication I discussed above, namely that each individual (or situation, for that matter), has multiple potentialities, which would allow for actualizations in different, often mutually exclusive, directions. We must always make decisions as to which potential we will develop, and this entails that other potentials will be suppressed or limited, momentarily or partially if not permanently or entirely. What I am thinking about, more specifically, is that there are multiple directions in which one may actualize their potential regarding one area in particular. For

example, in the context of one's social relations, one may have the opportunity, in the course of their life, to meet a wide variety of other people, and to like many of them. Consequently, they may wish to cultivate friendships with all of these people, but limitations of time will impose a choice of some sort – either regarding the number of (quality) relations one can reasonably cultivate, or regarding the "depth" at which one will take these relationships. We could make many examples to illustrate this point: we could consider the choices we have to make when choosing our major in college – we may be interested, and have the potential to succeed in, several of them – or the ones we have to make about the place where we will leave. The point should be clear: implicit in the very notion of actualization of one (and one's) potential is the fact that in order to ensure that, other potentials (both our and other individuals' potentials) will necessarily have to suffer or to be entirely suppressed.

The conclusion we can draw from these considerations, then, may seem somewhat disconcerting: no potential can be fully actualized, and not all potentials can be actualized. But since, on my account, what limits or restricts the actualization of the potential is violence, it would seem that violence is present in all of our actions – whether they are directed at ourselves or at others – and in all of our interactions, and that there is no context from which violence is absent. This is exactly my thesis: violence is everywhere, in everything we do.[48] To summarize, on my account violence is defined as the feature of an action or interaction that restricts the actualization of a human beings' potential. Since no potential can be fully actualized, and since it is impossible to (fully) actualize all the potential(s) of all human beings, violence turns out to be pervasive: it is inescapable, as it is an inevitable feature of the very concept of potential and, thus, it is the defining feature of our lives.

[48] I am not yet expressing any ethical evaluation about this, as I am still discussing the ontology of violence here. The discussion of the ethical aspects of violence will be the subject of the next chapter.

One may object that such a view of violence would make the concept unhelpful both at the ontological and at the ethical level: it would make all acts equivalent, and it would make it hard to even make a moral evaluation of acts that are all considered the same. One may say, in other words, that if everything is violence, then nothing is. I understand this concern, but I do not believe it is a legitimate one, or one that can present a serious challenge to my view. The fact that a variety of acts have a feature in common, however, does not mean that they cannot be differentiated. As I said above, and as I show in the next chapter, on the contrary, we can distinguish different forms of violence depending on the kind of potential that is being restricted or suppressed and depending on the degree to which one's potential is restricted. Regarding the first criterion, I will refer once again to Nussbaum's view, and show that basic capabilities (life, bodily integrity and bodily health, for example) are fundamental insofar as they ensure the very possibility for the development of higher capabilities. In addition, acts that limit the actualization of potential need to be individually evaluated on the basis of the *kind* and degree of limitation they cause. So, even if I don't provide a full solution to the ethical questions that are already clearly arising until next chapter, it should be clear that the view of violence I have delineated in this chapter is a maximalist one, for sure, but this does not mean that it is a vague or ineffective one.

A further, stronger objection to my view is that its focus on the notion of potentiality fails to account for the pain or suffering that are typically taken to be an important component of violence.[49] In fact, most accounts of violence, including the ones that I have discussed in the previous two chapters, regard the infliction of pain and/or the suffering caused by violence as a

[49] I thank Ermanno Bencivenga for both raising this objection and providing a solution to it – almost at the same time.

key component of violence and of what it does. In order to better understand this point, let us recall the definition I proposed at the beginning of this chapter:

(1) A violent action is an action performed by person A that limits or reduces the potential of person B.

In the second chapter, when explaining the major differences between the physicalist and the structural view of violence, I emphasized that they have different temporal dimensions. Specifically, I observed that physical violence can be identified by reference to a specific moment in time (an aspect related to the fact that this kind of violence can be identified with acts having a clearly identifiable agent), whereas structural violence takes place over a usually more prolonged timespan and its effects are also harder to relate to a specific moment in time. The temporal dimension of violence plays an important role also in the context of my account, and it is precisely what this objection calls into question: violence, understood as the cause of the limitation of human potential, harms the subject on the receiving end precisely insofar as it has an incapacitating effect. To do violence to someone, in other words, is to make them unable to actualize their potential: on this view, the main impact that violence has on the individual who receives it – and what defines violence as such – is on the future existence of that individual. The notion of potentiality, in fact, is essentially projected into a *future* in which, by definition, it may or may not be actualized – and whether it will be actualized or not will depend precisely on whether violence will be in place or not. Since potentiality is a concept that describes a (hypothetical) future, then, one may object that it fails to account for a different time in which the effects of violence take place and can be perceived, namely the *present* in which the pain, the suffering caused by violence are located to begin with.

In addition, there seems to be a further problem with the definition of violence I have proposed: a violent act may not "succeed," for a variety of reasons, in limiting one's potential. One may wonder, in this case, if my view would still count that as an act of violence or if it would describe it differently. We can imagine, in fact, a situation in which a person suffers violence but then forgets what happened, or simply never even created a memory, for example because she was unconscious when the violence happened – and she never learns about it. In this case, it seems that my view would not account for the event as an act of violence. In other words, if something like this is sufficient to preserve the victim from having the actualization of her potential undermined, does that violence no longer count as such?

Consider the following example: in the movie *About a Boy*, Marcus is the 12-year old, nice, sensitive, and naïve son of a hippie woman. His schoolmates consider him weird and they usually avoid him, but at some point they start harassing him and making fun of him because he does not fall under the expected standard of "cool," but rather represents the opposite of it through his clothes, his shoes, his haircut, his attitudes, and his behaviors. Harassing someone for their appearance and behavior, on my account, is a form of violence because it limits their potential to move about freely, to express themselves as they wish, and to develop their personality in a genuine way. Now, imagine that Marcus were not conscious during all of the episodes in which he was harassed by his classmates. Would those episodes not count as violence because the subject on the receiving end does not even suspect such episodes happened, and therefore does not suffer any consequences in terms of the actualization of his potential?

This example aims to illustrate the distinction between two aspects of the same act: on the one hand, in fact, we can consider what an act *does* at the very moment in which it is performed. The first aspect coincides with the "content" of the act and with the way in which it modifies the

present state of affairs. On the other hand, however, we can also consider the nature of an act on the basis of its consequences, of the effects it produces. This distinction can be further explained in two ways. The first consists in recalling the temporal distinction I mentioned earlier, whereby the focus on potentiality places violence in a dimension that includes, in particular, the future, while the emphasis on the pain and the suffering caused by violence puts the accent on the present moment. There is also, however, a further distinction that can help illuminate the difference between these two aspects, namely Austin's distinction between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary aspect of a speech act. His emphasis on *aspects* of a speech act is supposed to highlight that the distinction is not between different kinds of acts,[50] but between different things that the same speech act can do. The illocutionary aspect of a speech act is the one whereby, *in saying something*, we perform an act. Examples of what we can do in saying something are: asking a question, announcing a verdict or an intention, making a criticism.[51] The perlocutionary aspect of a speech act, on the other hand, is the one pertaining to what we do *by saying something*, and thus identifies the effects of something we say. Notice the difference in the preposition: the illocutionary act is done "in" saying something, that is, it coincides with the act of saying something.[52] The perlocutionary aspect of a speech act is constituted by the consequences of the act itself – the consequences that are produced *by* saying something.[53] For example, the reference to the perlocutionary aspect of a speech act can include the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience of the speech act, as affected by it.

[50] This was the case in the first version of his theory of speech acts, where he distinguished *constative* and *performative* speech acts: these corresponded to different *utterances*, not different meanings or implications of the same utterance, and thus to a linguistic/grammatical distinction.
[51] See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1962, 98-100.
[52] Common examples of illocutionary acts are the actions that performed in uttering the words "I apologize" or "I pronounce you wife and husband." In the latter case, the two people in front of the minister actually *become* (or, we may say: are made into) spouses *in virtue of the fact* that those words have been uttered. In the former case, the act of apologizing coincides with the act of uttering the words "I apologize."
[53] See ibid., 101.

The objection to my first formulation of my definition of violence, thus, calls attention on the illocutionary aspect of doing violence to someone – that is, what the act of violence *does* in the very moment of its performance, *in* being performed – and criticizes an apparently disproportionate emphasis of my account on the perlocutionary aspect, that is, the effects – in terms of reduction of potential – produced *by* performing the act of violence. I believe this objection captures an important feature of what it means to be on the receiving end of violence, to which my first formulation does not fully do justice: first of all, when the actualization of one's potential is hindered or limited, the individual whose potential is restricted suffers because of such restriction. Their freedom is reduced and the inability to fully determine the direction of their development or actualization causes pain. But, and this is the second and most important way in which the objection captures an important aspect of what violence does, the very act of inflicting violence can (and often do) cause pain or suffering. Physical acts of violence are an obvious example of this, but that is the case also with psychological violence, verbal violence, and other kinds of violence. An advantage of this added emphasis on the illocutionary aspect of violence, thus, is that it makes room for the account of the *experience* of violence (especially on the receiving end of it), in addition to the account of what violence produces concerning the long(er)-term development of the individual. I propose, thus, this reformulation of my definition of violence:

> (2) A violent action is an action performed by person A that results in a potential reduction or suppression of the potential of person B.

Or, if we will, in a version that includes an explicit reference to the suffering and pain caused by violence:

(3) A violent action is an action performed by person A that typically causes suffering or pain to person B, and that results in a potential reduction or suppression of the actualization of B's potential.

Through this formulation we can highlight some aspects of violence whose importance had perhaps not been fully acknowledged earlier in this discussion. First of all, violence is characterized by two fundamental elements: suffering or pain, as resulting from the injury violence causes, and the reduction of potential. The first element emphasizes what I have called the illocutionary aspect of violence, following Austin's theory of speech acts, and thus, specifically, the injury constituted by what the violent act does to those who receive it. The second element is the answer to the question about what is violated by the act of violence, namely human potential, the actualization of which violence reduces, and which I have discussed at length in this chapter. What this reformulation of the definition of violence enables us to do is to account also for those cases in which the violent act *may* reduce or block the actualization of one's potential, but for whatever reason does not succeed at doing it. The reasons for this can be that the act simply fails at accomplishing that end, or that the victim (as in the example discussed above) does not retain any memory of the event and therefore the actualization of her potential is not affected by the act, or that the victim simply has great resilience.

In regard to the aspect of suffering, it should be observed that the concept of potential, in the specific way I proposed to use it within an account of violence, may as well account for it: the emphasis that the capabilities approach places on the capacity for bodily and emotional integrity, for example, can do a good job of explaining how suffering has is precisely the incapacitating of the potential for these forms of integrity. At the same time, however, the emphasis is on the effect – that is, the perlocutionary aspect – of suffering, and not on the

illocutionary aspect: and this is precisely the aspect that is often considered to play a crucial role in the *experience* of violence. It seems appropriate, then, to do justice to it by making it explicit.[54]

A further aspect this formulation makes clear – which was already present in the first version I proposed at the beginning of this chapter – is the explicit presence of an agent. While in the context of the discussion of the structural views of violence I emphasized the difficulty to identify a subject *doing* the violence, and observed that this is one of the main differences between physicalist and structural views, in my account of violence the subject is again given a crucial, explicit role. This emphasis is a consequence of two combined elements: on the one hand, it follows from the broad conception of action I supported in the second chapter; on the other hand, it follows from the maximalist view of violence I have proposed. There is always a subject doing the violence – most likely, and in most cases, there will be several subjects for each act of reducing one's potential. We are all involved in a complex network of interrelations, choices, and actions that cause the reduction of others' potential, often in ways that we are only partially aware of and that we only partially choose. The sphere of our personal responsibility, as it emerges from my account, seems to become much wider, and to extend to a much broader context, where the potential of each individual is connected to, depends from, and/or is in conflict with, the potential of all (or many) other individuals. As a consequence, it seems that what can be attributed to us is not only the individual, limited action we consciously choose to perform at a given moment, but – as in a Greek tragedy – the totality of the consequences that spring from it. In the next chapter I examine in some more detail the meaning and implications of this conclusion, and explore an ethical approach that can help us deal with such implications.

[54] For a focus on the philosophical understanding of the experience of violence, see for example M. Staudigl (ed.), *Phenomenologies of Violence*, Leiden/Boston: Brill 2014. For a discussion of violence that directly engages authors in the phenomenological tradition, see J. Dodd, *Violence and Phenomenology*, New York: Routledge 2009.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Ethics of Violence

1. *Actions, Consequences, and Responsibility*

The conclusion of the previous chapter showed that my account of violence has important implications concerning the way in which we evaluate our actions, and that these implications need to be addressed by an appropriate ethical reflection. Specifically, I proposed an account of violence that regards it as the defining character of an act which causes pain and/or suffering to an individual, and that potentially restricts the actualization of the individual's potential. The latter is in turn understood broadly, through an appeal to Nussbaum's notion of capability, and includes an extremely wide variety of directions and ways in which a human being can develop. As I showed in the previous chapter, however, it is implicit in the very notion of potential that no potential can be fully actualized, that not all potentials can be actualized, and that the actualization of any potential requires the restriction or suppression of other potentials (pertaining to the same individual) or of the potentials of other individuals. Consequently, given my definition of violence, it turns out that violence is an omnipresent feature of our lives, and that it is a necessary feature of everything we do.

It is important to remember, at this point, that my account of violence is an account of the ontology of violence, and that it is not *yet* engaged in an ethical evaluation of violence itself or of actions that fall under the definition, that is, all of our actions. Given such an account, however, one may observe that if this is what violence is, then we are all irremediably guilty and there is nothing we can do about it. This is not how I see the problem. On the contrary, I believe that although my ontology is a negative one – in that its main explanatory concept is the concept of

negation, or of deprivation – this does not have to imply that the ethics which has the task to deal with such a scenario must be a negative one as well. At the same time, the account I have presented *does* change the whole framework of the ethical discussion, in particular concerning the "rules" for the attribution of responsibility to agents and the ones we should use in deliberating about and evaluating our (and other people's) actions.

The ordinary way of looking at the meaning of action seems to identify four main features of our acting: consciousness, deliberation (or choice), limited consequences, and neutrality of inaction. The first feature refers to the general assumption that we are conscious of the actions we perform, that is, that we know *what* we are doing and *that* we are doing it, at least in normal circumstances. When this is not the case, we tend to think that the agent does not fully "own" their actions and is therefore not to be considered fully responsible for them. The second feature refers to the fact that we typically view actions as being preceded by a process of deliberation and by the decision to perform them: this means that (at least ideally), when we act, we have already carefully reflected on a variety of possible ways to approach a given situation and have selected what seems to be the best possible course of action, one that we think is morally right in itself – especially if we follow a deontological approach, whether consciously or not – or one that produces the most desirable consequences – in this case by following some sort of consequentialist approach. The third feature of the ordinary view is that it regards the consequences of our actions as having a limited scope. This means that we typically consider ourselves responsible only for the direct, immediate consequences of our acts. Sometimes these include also the unintended and/or unwanted consequences of our acts, those we did not calculate in the course of our deliberation process or that we did expect, but considered acceptable given the main goal we were pursuing. The fourth aspect of our ordinary idea of

action, as I mentioned in the second chapter, seems to be that when we do not act, we are ethically "safe": in other words, and with the exceptions of blatant omissions,[1] it would seem that when we do not do anything, i.e. when we are not actively intervening in, and thus modifying, the current state of affairs, we are not responsible for any aspect of said state of affairs, however good or bad said state may be. As a consequence, the ordinary understanding of action implies that by not doing anything we are automatically, or "inertially"[2] right. The sphere of "pertinence" of our agency and of our moral responsibility, in this view, is thus relatively narrow: it identifies the set of our actions that are a result of our conscious deliberation and the immediate, direct consequences of these actions.

A different idea of what an action is, of its consequences, and of our moral responsibility, however, seems to emerge from the view I have presented in the previous chapters. Whether this idea follows directly from my view or not, at the very least it seems to offer a more adequate understanding of the nature of our agency in the context of my account of violence and to enable us to pose the right questions when discussing its ethical implications. In this different scenario, the four features I just outlined may be absent, entirely reversed, or just insufficient to describe what counts as acting. To begin with, as we saw in the second chapter, my view is that whether we are actively doing something or not, we are always *acting*. At every moment, in every situation, we face a multiplicity of possible courses of action. These include not doing anything – and thereby letting the situation follow its own course – as well as performing a variety of actions that may change the course of events. In this sense, we are constantly making choices – even if we are not aware that we are – between the options we have. The first two features of our ordinary understanding of actions, thus, are not necessarily and always present: we do not always

[1] A typical example of this kind of omission would be one's failure to save a child who is drowning in a pond, or to call 911 when seeing that someone is being assaulted.
[2] I thank Ermanno Bencivenga for suggesting an understanding of this point in terms of "inertia."

consciously (and even less, rationally) consider the options that are available to us at a specific moment in time, and in a particular situation, and consciously (and rationally) decide that we are going to select "option x" from that set of available options. I am talking, here, of two views that differ importantly, especially on one general aspect: for the first – the one I have identified with our "ordinary" view of action – our actions may be seen as "disturbances" with respect to the otherwise even, homogenous, and morally *neutral* unfolding of our daily existence. For the second, the very unfolding of our daily existence is *made out of* those disturbances: we are constantly acting, so there is no inertial dimension to our existence. The very distinction between behavior and conduct – whereby the latter identifies the parts of our acting that are conscious and *chosen* (and therefore morally relevant), and the former identifies the *neutral* parts of our acting, the part we share with animals, for example – seems to make little sense, in this context: everything we do is part of our conduct, and is therefore subject to moral evaluation.

A further, important aspect that this alternative view of action considers in a different way is that concerning the consequences of our actions and the scope of our responsibility for them. In the second chapter I observed that moral theories are often based on the analysis of idealized situations and offer guidance for our actions in the form of general, abstract principles that will help identify the right course of action. One of the elements that are often idealized in moral theory is the nature of the *context* in which our actions take place, and the consequences they produce: in order to clarify the "components" of a specific situation we often need to simplify said situation, and in order to do that we need to narrow down our focus to a context of limited, manageable scope. However, as I said in those pages, we never act in a void, but rather in a complex context populated by many elements and actors that constantly interact with one another, producing chains of consequences or effects that are hardly predictable and controllable,

but definitely not limited in scope, space, and time. On the contrary, it may well be the case that the consequences of an apparently small action become gradually deeper and farther reaching, in a way that reminds of the chain of consequences described within chaos theory as the "butterfly effect."[3] If we accept this framework, then, the scope of our responsibility for our actions and their effects seems to become much wider than we one would expect and, perhaps, wish. This means, in fact, that we will never have complete control over the consequences of our actions – nor of their morality.[4]

If one accepts this view of action and combines it with my view of violence, the picture becomes even less reassuring and one may as well feel paralyzed by it, unable to act. If violence is a necessary, inevitable feature of everything we (and others) do, and the scope of our moral responsibility cannot be limited to the immediate, relatively manageable effects of what we do, what kind of ethics can then be adequate as a guide for our action? What kind of principles or criteria can we apply in this context? In order to start exploring possible answers to this question, I will first examine the distinction between ideal and nonideal theory, and then propose what I consider the beginning of an answer to the ethical question I am addressing. This answer will be based on the notion of ecosystem and on the idea of an ecological ethics that can be developed on the basis of this notion.

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[3] For an insightful discussion of the relation between chaos theory and ethics and of the latter's need to develop new, appropriate categories on the basis of the new understanding of nature proposed by the former, see T. Kwiatowska, "Beyond Uncertainties: Some Open Questions about Chaos and Ethics," *Ethics and the Environment* 6 (2001), no. 1: 96-115. "The questions raised by unforeseen consequences of human decisions are […] moral questions. They are questions of choices, which look to the standards of values for their answers. […]. The ecological perspective of life, particularly the interactive openness to the environment or 'otherness' through which the unknown, novel, and creative forms or functions can arise unexpectedly, 'heralds new metaphysic, a new logic, and a new ethic' derived from the self-organizing systems marked by change, heterogeneity, and multiplicity." Ibid., 97.

[4] This, of course, does not hold if one endorses a strict deontological perspective. A discussion of whether the adoption of such a perspective would justify ignoring the consequences of our actions altogether is beyond the scope of this chapter, but nonetheless an important one, and one whose conclusion is all but obvious. See for example E. Bencivenga, "Consequences in Kantian Ethics," *American Dialectic* 1 (2011), no. 2: 275-284.

2. *The Ecological Approach between Ideal and Nonideal Moral Theory*

In the previous section, while explaining the difference between what I have called the ordinary view of action and the alternative view of action emerging from my account of violence, I observed that moral theory often idealizes the circumstances in which we act and, as a consequence, may fail to properly account for the scope of our moral responsibility for our actions and of the consequences springing from them in a context such as the one I have described. This raises some questions about the nature of moral theory itself, especially concerning its aim and its method. By "aim" I mean, specifically, the *function* of moral theory: this question is related to the kind of reality that the theory refers to or accounts for, and, as a consequence, what it is supposed to help us understand. One of the main differences between ideal theory and nonideal theory, in fact, is that the former describes the features of an ideal society, whereas the latter tries to tell us what to do vis-à-vis an unjust society. As regards the method, questions concern the way moral theory should describe and analyze the context in which our actions take place, how this theory should understand the epistemic and moral capacities of the subjects acting in such context, and what kind of rules moral theory should propose.

The debate on ideal and nonideal theory deals precisely with this kind of questions. It is a rather complex debate, and it is not always clear what the different authors mean by "ideal" and "nonideal."[5] The phrase "ideal theory" originates from political theory and was first introduced

[5] For an introduction to the debate see C. W. Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," *Hypatia* 20 (2005), no. 3: 165-184; K. M. Graham, "Non-Ideal Moral Theory," in D. K. Chatterjee (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Global Justice*, Dordrech/New York: Springer 2011: 758-760; S. R. L. Clark, "Abstract Morality, Concrete Cases," in J. D. G. Evans (ed.), *Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Problems*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987: 35-53; O. O' Neill, "Abstraction, Idealization and Ideology in Ethics," in *Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Problems*: 55-69; J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1999; Id., *The Law of Peoples*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1999; Id., *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2001; S. Rodgers, "Ideal and Nonideal Theory: Untangling the Debate," *International Journal of Education* 6 (2014), no. 2: 46-57; L. Schwartzman, "Abstraction, Idealization, and Oppression," *Metaphilosophy* 37 (2006), no. 5: 565-588;

by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* in order to clarify and circumscribe the scope of his account. Generally speaking, ideal theory aims to identify the key principles that should guide a perfectly just society, and thus describes these principles starting from the assumption that the society it is talking about is *already* just. By contrast, nonideal theory focuses on what we should do in order to turn our actual society into a just one, and thus starts from the assumption that the society to which the principles must be applied is characterized by social injustice and by various forms of oppression and inequality. More specifically, ideal theory – as described by Rawls – has two main features: first, it assumes "strict compliance," namely that all or most of the members of the ideal society comply with the principles of justice and thus act morally. The second feature of ideal theory is that it articulates the principles that would regulate a just society under "favorable circumstances," which, in Rawls's words, include "historical, economic, and social conditions," among which are "economic means, … education, or the many skills needed to run a democratic regime."[6] On the contrary, nonideal theory purports to address moral and political questions assuming non- or partial compliance and unfavorable circumstances. It is thus concerned with the moral and political questions that it considers relevant to our actual society, characterized by injustice and by socio-economic limitations. From the point of view of nonideal theory, the two features of ideal theory are "insensitive to the realities of the world" and therefore this kind of theory is "bound to depart from facts about any contemporary society."[7]

Rawls defends the merits of ideal theory on the basis of two considerations: first, ideal theory provides what we may call a regulative ideal, a picture of what the ideal society would

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"What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice?" *The Journal of Philosophy* 103 (2006), no. 5: 215-238; A. J. Simmons, "Ideal Theory and Nonideal Theory," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 38 (2010): 5-36; Z. Stemplovska, "Ideal and Nonideal Theory," in D. Estlund, *The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy*, New York: Oxford University Press 2012: 373-389; Ead., "What's Ideal about Ideal Theory?" *Social Theory and Practice* 34 (2008), no.3: 319-340.

[6] Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 47. Cited in Stemplowska, "Ideal and Nonideal Theory," 375.

[7] Stemplowska, "Ideal and Nonideal Theory," 375.

look like, on the basis of which we will be able to understand with greater accuracy the nature of the concrete problems affecting our current societies. Second, it offers a criterion – something like a unit of measure – for the assessment of the degree of injustice in our society, depending on how much it deviates from the norm, i.e., the ideal. Some authors, however, believe that ideal theory is not capable of fulfilling these two functions and that it cannot be in any of use for the task of actually improving the conditions of our society. Amartya Sen, for example, claims that ideal theory is neither necessary nor sufficient for the purposes of advancing justice that characterize nonideal theory. The latter, for him, is concerned with the comparison between different, actual societies, and he believes we do not need to refer to a detailed account of the ideal, fully just society in order to determine, say, whether "the introduction of social policies that abolish slavery, or eliminate widespread hunger, or remove rampant illiteracy, can be shown to yield an advancement of justice."[8] Other authors have a much more radical stance and think that ideal theory is actually counterproductive, if its goal is to advance justice: this is because, according to them, ideal theory presupposes much more than the two aspects it explicitly acknowledges, and that this not only compromises the solidity of the theory and its capacity to actually advance justice, but might even expose it as being functional to, if not complicit with, injustice. Charles Mills, for example, lists five idealizing assumptions he believes characterize ideal theory in addition to compliance: an idealized social ontology,[9] idealized individual capacities, silence on oppression,[10] ideal social institutions,[11] and an idealized cognitive sphere.[12]

[8] Sen, "What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice?" 217.

[9] "An idealized social ontology of the modern type […] will typically assume the abstract and undifferentiated equal atomic individuals of classical liberalism. Thus it will abstract *away* from relations of structural domination, exploitation, coercion, and oppression, which in reality, of course, will profoundly shape the ontology of those same individuals, locating them in superior and inferior positions in social hierarchies of various kinds." Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," 168.

[10] "Almost by definition, it follows from the focus of ideal theory that little or nothing will be said on actual historic oppression and its legacy in the present, or current ongoing oppression […]. Correspondingly, the way in which systematic oppression is likely to shape the basic social institutions (as well as the humans in those institutions) will

His conclusion is that ideal theory, by deciding to ignore a vast array of "facts" that characterize our society in important ways, cannot be of any help in addressing injustice, especially as it is related to those facts. As long as our moral and political theories fail to deal with such facts, for Mills, they can only rationalize the status quo.[13]

A detailed discussion of Sen's and Mills' views on ideal and nonideal theory is beyond the purposes of the present chapter. However, a key distinction emerges from this discussion, which I think is relevant to the nature of my proposal, namely the distinction between the task of delineating the features of the ideal society (what Sen calls the transcendental theory of justice) and the task of understanding how to reduce the injustice(s) characterizing our actual society.[14] We may regard ideal and nonideal theory as representative of two methods of (or views on) moral reasoning: ideal theory brackets the actual features of our existing society and employs abstract principles, that is, principles that are presumably independent from our particular features as agents and from our positionalities as individuals in the real world. Such principles are supposed, therefore, to have universal validity. It is only at a second stage, if ever, that ideal theory addresses the concrete reality of our social realm on the basis of its principles. At this point, of course, ideal theory may find itself dealing with a reality that *resists* the application of

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not be part of the theory's concern, and this will manifest in the absence of ideal-as-descriptive model concepts that would provide the necessary macro- and micro-mapping of that oppression, and that are requisite for understanding its reproductive dynamic." Ibid., 168-169.

[11] "Fundamental social institutions such as the family, the economic structure, the legal system, will therefore be conceptualized in ideal-as-idealized-model terms, with little or no sense of how their actual workings may systematically disadvantage women, the poor, and racial minorities." Ibid., 169.

[12] "As a corollary of the general ignoring of oppression, the consequences *of* oppression for the social cognition of these agents, both the advantaged and the disadvantaged, will typically not be recognized, let alone theorized. A general social transparency will be presumed, with cognitive obstacles minimized as limited to biases of self-interest or the intrinsic difficulties of understanding the world, and little or no attention paid to the distinctive role of hegemonic ideologies and group-specific experience in distorting our perception and conceptions of the social order." Ibid., 169.

[13] And a simple "extension" of ideal theory to include those facts, for Mills, would not be sufficient. See ibid., 177-182.

[14] Sen calls this approach "comparative" because, as we saw above, he believes that one of the main tasks of this theory is to rank different social arrangements in order to determine which ones are more just, for the purposes of advancing justice. See Sen, "What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice?," 216.

those principles. Nonideal theory proceeds in the opposite way: it starts from the examination of the concrete, actual reality of our society in order to understand the nature and dynamics of injustice. This is regarded as a necessary step if one wants to be able to formulate the right principles for addressing injustice and advancing justice, the latter being a goal, in other words, that one can only achieve through a clear understanding of injustice and its workings. In this sense, ideal theory may be seen as "weaker" than nonideal theory, because most of its efforts are devoted to the characterization of ideal circumstances and of the rules governing them; this does not necessarily mean that exceptions to those circumstances will destroy ideal theory, but the latter may not always be equipped to deal with them if it does not also include the appropriate conceptual tools for addressing them. For nonideal theory, on the other hand, exceptions are *the norm*, the default that its rules and analyses must address: for this reason, nonideal theory may be more helpful than ideal theory in providing us with the tools to advance social justice.

The distinction between ideal and nonideal theory is important for the purposes of clarifying the nature of my proposal in this chapter. The ontology of violence I presented in the course of the previous chapters *imposes* an approach to ethics that starts from the assumption that agents do not – *cannot* – comply with ideal, standard rules of ethical conduct. Actually, one of the key aspects of the theory I delineated is precisely that full compliance – understood, within my theory, as the ability to fully actualize human potential and to actualize all human potentials – is impossible, and that the circumstances are, as a consequence, all but favorable. An ethics that aims to address injustice and violence, understood as pervasive features of our society, must start from, and fully engage, precisely those unfavorable circumstances. This does not mean, however, that my ethical proposal is not normative or does not appeal to any ideal or ideal dimension. In fact, the debate about ideal and nonideal theory emphasizes a difference between

two approaches, but these approaches need not be mutually exclusive, as some of the participants in the debate (Sen, for example) seem to think. The issue, specifically revolves mostly around the meaning we give to the terms in this debate. "Ideal," in particular, can have different meanings, and not all of these meanings (or perhaps none of them) must be necessarily rejected or excluded by a theory that aims to deal with questions of actual injustice within our society. Charles Mills, for example, distinguishes three meanings of the term "ideal": the first, which he calls "ideal-as-normative," is the general meaning whereby every ethical theory, by definition, deals "with normative/prescriptive/evaluative issues, as against factual/descriptive issues," and thus necessarily "involves the appeal to values and ideals,"[15] independently of its specific approach. The second meaning is that which he calls "ideal-as-descriptive-model": in this case, "ideal" is a feature of the model – understood as a representation – we elaborate in order to describe a certain phenomenon in the natural or social world. The model, in this case, is necessarily ideal because it is in the nature of representation itself not to coincide with its object it is a representation of, but to abstract from some of its features and to focus on others, which are regarded as essential: this way, the "ideal-as-descriptive-model" will produce a "schematized picture of the actual workings and actual nature"[16] of the phenomenon it aims to represent. The third meaning of ideal is that of "ideal-as-idealized-model:" the same phenomenon we can represent for descriptive purposes can also be represented through an ideal model whose purpose is to provide an example of how the *ideal* version of the phenomenon itself – an ideal society, for instance – should be. According to Mills, there is nothing wrong with any of these meanings. The problem, rather, arises when ideal theory tries to understand and deal with a certain (actual) phenomenon on the basis of an idealized model of the phenomenon itself. In order to effectively act on a phenomenon with the

[15] Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," 166.
[16] Ibid., 167.

aim of bringing it closer to the ideal model, on the contrary, it is necessary to work with the ideal but also with the nonideal, that is, with the descriptive model, which will tell us how the phenomenon works and why it is distant from the ideal. In this sense, ideal theories à la Rawls are criticized because of their "reliance on idealization to the exclusion, or at least marginalization, of the actual."[17]

Let us now return to my proposal of an ecological ethics and see how Mills' observations, which I think point in the right direction, can be applied to my view. Ideal and nonideal theory should complement each other: the former should guide the latter in its dealing with concrete questions, with our practice, and with our deliberation, but at the same time the latter should *inform* the former, whose principles must be given actual content through the observation and study of the nature and workings of injustice. Margaret Radin suggests a promising approach to this issue in her discussion of the double bind in relation to the commodification of women's sexuality and reproductive capacity. The double bind is defined by Radin as a two-pronged dilemma in which both horns are negative for different reasons.[18] This is a common occurrence when it comes to women's lives: for example, when discussing the legalization of prostitution, it is easy to observe that both options (legalizing it versus not legalizing it) will harm women in different ways. Women's economic empowerment and their right to self-determination, which may support legalization, are contrasted with concerns about the commodification and objectification of women's bodies, which in turn are common arguments against the legalization of prostitution. None of the options, in fact, is ideal or just. For Radin, this kind of problem is

[17] Ibid., 168.
[18] M. J. Radin, "The Pragmatist and the Feminist," *Southern California Law Review* 63 (1990): 1699-1711; reprinted in D. A. Adams (ed.), *Philosophical Problems in the Law*, Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth 2005, 134-139. For an introduction to the notion of double bind, see G. Bateson, "Double Bind," in Id., *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2000, 271-278. The first discussion of the double bind appeared in G. Bateson, D. D. Jackson, J. Haley, J. & J. Weakland, "Towards a Theory of Schizophrenia," *Behavioral Science* 1 (1956), no. 4: 251–264.

typical of nonideal justice insofar as it deals with a context that is unjust to begin with. In this case, the "unfavorable circumstances" are constituted by the systematic oppression and subordination of women in our society.[19] According to Radin, only "piecemeal, temporary," and thus necessarily nonideal solutions are the only option available in a context of injustice. These solutions, however, must be guided by ideal principles: nonideal theory is "the process by which we try to make progress (effect a transition) toward our vision of the good world"[20] and thus we need ideal theory in order to know how we would want the good world to look like, what our final goal is.

In the pages that follow I propose an ethical framework that is situated at the intersection of these two approaches: on the one hand, my starting point will be determined by the recognition of the unfavorable circumstances I discussed above. On the other hand, I will try to delineate a model and propose principles which can guide us toward the end goal, and which I will define as the equilibrium and well-being of the human community in its interaction with its environment. The outcome will be a limited one on both accounts: from the point of view of nonideal theory, because much work is still needed in order to fully articulate the details concerning the nature and workings of injustice and violence – although I believe I have provided the conceptual framework for such an articulation in the previous chapters. From the point of view of ideal theory because, as I will show, the very principles I will propose will be open to revision and constant adjustment, and will have to be defined in more detail as the nonideal part of the theory will be refined. I think it is important, nonetheless, to be clear about the general framework within which this work will have to be done.

[19] Radin, "The Pragmatist and the Feminist," 134-135.
[20] Ibid., 135.

3. *Foundations for an Ecological Ethics: From the Aquarium to the Human Community.*

3.1 *Ecosystems as "Living Communities"*

By "ecological ethics" I do not mean an ethics that addresses (only) issues concerning the environment and its preservation from human intervention, misuse, and overuse, but an ethical approach that adopts as a central idea that of the fundamental interconnectedness of all human beings – one that includes the relations of human beings with other living beings and the environment, but is not limited to that. In other words, I propose an ethical approach that looks at the *entirety* of human interactions and connections and that understands and evaluates actions with respect to the whole of those interactions and connections. The idea, as I stated in the first section of this chapter, is to consider everything we do and not do as pertaining to the sphere of action, and to view the scope of the consequences of what we do as including the far-reaching, less predictable effects, and not only the immediate, direct effects of what we do (or not do).

In order to better understand the approach I am proposing, we may start from the concept of ecosystem, which is at the basis of the standard, current approach within the biological sciences. The second article of the Convention for Biological Diversity, for example, defines an ecosystem as

> [A] dynamic complex of plant, animal, and micro-organism communities and their non-living environment interacting as a functional unit.[21]

Let us unpack this definition: to begin with, an ecosystem is a "complex" of different kinds of beings – plants, animals, and micro-organisms – or, more specifically, of communities constituted by these different kinds of beings, which stand in a dynamic relation to one another.

[21] From the text of the Convention for Biological Diversity, art. 2. See https://www.cbd.int/convention/articles/default.shtml?a=cbd-02 (retrieved on March 3, 2016).

A threefold set of intersecting relations, in this sense, characterizes this particular structure: the relations that take place within each community constituting the ecosystem (i.e., the relations *constituting* the community itself), the relations that such communities, in turn, entertain with one another, and the relations of these communities taken as a whole with their (non-living) environment. An eco-system is thus constituted by multiple communities of living beings which, through their mutual interactions, give rise to a "dynamic complex." The whole of these interactions, if certain conditions obtain, gives rise to a unitary entity – the ecosystem – which constitutes a "functional unit." In turn, we may add, every ecosystem interacts with other ecosystems, and certain conditions have to be met also at this level of interaction in order for the participating members to be able to function properly. One of the crucial factors affecting the functioning of the whole system is the presence of *biological diversity*,[22] ensuring that in each ecosystem each member and each community can perform its functions and thus contribute to the healthy and harmonious development of the whole.

Important insights into the concept of ecosystem can be found in Konrad Lorenz's *King Solomon's Ring*, especially in the second chapter, where he talks about aquariums, their delicate

[22] Biological diversity is typically taken to include genetic diversity (the variety of genes contained in the living species), species diversity (which includes all of the different species existing on Earth, as well as the differences within and between species), and ecosystem diversity (understood as the different habitats, biological communities, and ecological processes, but also as the variation within individual ecosystems). For a basic introduction to the concept of biological diversity, see the factsheet of the United Nations Environment Programme, World Conservation Monitoring Centre, "What Is Biodiversity?" available at http://www.unep.org/wed/2010/english/PDF/BIODIVERSITY_FACTSHEET.pdf (retrieved) on April 18, 2016). The Fifth Principle of the Convention for Biological Diversity reads: "Ecosystem functioning and resilience depends on a dynamic relationship within species, among species and between species and their abiotic environment, as well as the physical and chemical interaction within the environment. The conservation and, where appropriate, restoration of these interactions and processes is of greater significance for the long-term maintenance of biological diversity than simply protection of species." The relevance of these considerations to my proposal will become gradually clear in the course of the present chapter.

functioning, and what we should avoid doing if we want our small aquatic communities to thrive.[23] The fundamental concept guiding these pages is that of "biological equilibrium":

> The aquarium is a world; for, as in a natural pond or lake, indeed as all over our whole planet, animal and vegetable beings live together in biological equilibrium.[24]

What is essential for the survival and correct functioning of the aquarium, as well as of any kind of ecosystem – whatever its size is, up to the entire planet – is the quality of the relations holding between the different living beings sharing that space and the ensuing equilibrium of the system as a whole. Each kind of living being has a specific way of being, which corresponds to its function within the ecosystem: plants absorb the carbon dioxide that the animals breathe out, and exhale oxygen which then animals breathe in. The carbon dioxide that the plants inhale, in turn, is used by the plants to build their body substance. Bacteria decompose dead bodies, and produce substances that the plants process and make available to the system. Lorenz names the three main groups "the constructors" (the plants), "the consumers" (the animals), and "the decomposers" (the bacteria). Each of them, and their life activity, is essential to the functioning of the aquarium, but in order for the whole system to work there must be a balance between the number of plants, animals, and bacteria:

> In the restricted space of the aquarium, this natural cycle of metabolism is easily disturbed and such a disturbance has catastrophic results for our little world. Many aquarium keepers, children and adults alike, are unable to resist the temptation of slipping just one more fish into the container, the capacity of whose green plants is already overburdened with animals. And just this one more fish may be the

[23] Although not necessary for present purposes, his distinction between a "genuine" aquarium – the one a person can set up without artificial devices, and which reproduces one's local aquatic environment – and the "cage" aquarium, that is, "an artificially cleaned container which is not an end in itself, but purely a means of keeping certain animals," is interesting, in my view, insofar as it illustrates an important distinction concerning the attitudes of humans towards nature and other living beings that inhabit it (and thus, in general, the attitudes of humans toward their ecosystem. See K. Lorenz, *King Solomon's Ring*, London and New York: Routledge 2004, 13.
[24] Ibid., 10.

> final straw that breaks the camel's back. With too many animals in the aquarium, a lack of oxygen ensues. Sooner or later some organism will succumb to this and its death may easily pass unnoticed.[25]

The equilibrium of the aquarium is a delicate one, one that is easily disrupted by the addition of one more fish, which alone may make it impossible for the plants to sustain the necessary exchange between carbon dioxide and oxygen and thereby cause a lack of the latter. This results in the impossibility for all of the animals to survive in the environment, and the death of some of them. Lorenz emphasizes the idea that the aquarium is a "living community" that "regulates its own equilibrium"[26]: the basic unit to be considered, then, is the ecosystem itself, the "dynamic complex" of communities of living beings "interacting as a functional unit."

3.2 *The Human Aquarium*

My idea here is to use the notion of ecosystem as a basis, or as a metaphor.[27] By using the term "metaphor" I do not think of some sort of escape into a vague representation that may replace the careful thinking that is necessary to articulate a concept. I see a metaphor, in quite traditional terms, as an image that shares *some* essential features with the concept one intends to articulate, and that may serve as a useful basis or tool for the identification and "extraction" of those features. At each step, however, it will be important to remember that the two things we are

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[25] Ibid., 11. This passage, in the context of my discussion on the ethics of violence, may suggest an easy comparison to dynamics concerning human beings and a connection to Lorenz's endorsement of the Nazi's racial ideology and policies. An evaluation of this important aspect of his life is beyond the scope of the present discussion, and I will not address it here, but this should not be taken as meaning that I underestimate the importance of these facts. For an introduction to the cultural and scientific context within which these views originated, see Livingston Smith, *Less than Human*, 62-71. For the purposes of my discussion, my focus here is on the conceptual structure underlying the life and functioning of the aquarium, as of any ecosystem: my aim is to identify that conceptual structure and to explore its possible applications to the ways in which we evaluate our actions.

[26] *King Solomon's Ring*, 13.

[27] Other existing ethical approaches use concepts pertaining to ecology as a basis. Mostly, however, they start from a concern for the environment and build an ethical framework that makes this kind of concern foundational to the framework itself. One such approach, and one I consider particularly interesting, is that proposed by Tim Hayward, who places the notion of "ecological space" at the center of his ethics. See, for example, T. Hayward, "Ecology, Ethics, and Global Justice," in R. Rozzi et al. (eds.), *Linking Ecology and Ethics for a Changing World: Values, Philosophy, and Action*, Dordrecht: Springer 2013: 231-240.

talking about – the object represented by the image and the concept we are trying to articulate – are *not* the same thing; moreover, their differences should be made explicit in order to clarify the use of the concept and avoid misunderstandings.[28]

Using the concept of ecosystem can be productive for a variety of reasons. In general, I think that we should include this concept in our ethical vocabulary because we *are*, as a matter of fact, natural beings: we are part of ecosystems and have an important impact (often, a destructive one) on our own ecosystem and on other ones. As a consequence, I believe that an ethical perspective acknowledging that humans are natural beings and are part of a natural world should start from this idea – although here I will focus on interactions between humans and not necessarily on the interactions between human beings and their environment.[29] The second, important reason why an approach based on the notion of ecosystem can be helpful in addressing the kind of ethical questions I aim to answer in this chapter is that I believe that this concept and its semantic-conceptual field constitute a valuable alternative to the liberal framework and to its limited understanding of the subject and of the sphere of action.[30] The latter framework, as we saw, views the subject as self-contained, independent, and free, and the sphere of action as restricted to the conscious and deliberate conduct of this subject and to the immediate

[28] In this sense, for example, one may ask about the extent to which my use of the metaphor applies, and specifically whether my use of the concept of ecosystem is meant to be sympathetic to naturalizing approaches to ethics. The debate about this issue is a complex one, that I cannot fully address in this context. My use of the notion of ecosystem and the consequences I draw in terms of an ecological approach to ethics, however, do not find their justification (nor their normative force) in natural processes, but are rather meant to suggest a focus on the community as opposed to the individual, and to derive some principles for action from this focus. In some sense, then, this view might be supported by both sides of the debate – as one may support it whether they believe that the natural and the prescriptive levels are coextensive or not – but in this context I will remain neutral with respect to this debate.

[29] I consider it, however, a key part of the discussion and plan to develop it in the future, when I will further expand this project and look at its applications to concrete areas of interest, including issues concerning race, gender, class, the environment, etc. As I said in the introduction, however, I have decided to restrict the present study to the violence humans do to one another, so I mention these aspects here, but I will not expand on them.

[30] A similar perspective emerges from J. Baird Callicott, "Ecology and Moral Ontology," in D. Bergandi (ed.), *The Structural Links between Ecology, Evolution, and Ethics: The Virtuous Epistemic Circle*, Dordrecht: Springer 2013: 101-116. In this piece, Callicott discusses a relational moral ontology (versus what he calls a "monadic" one) as emerging from a "superecosystemic" conception of the human being.

consequences of its actions. The ecological framework I am proposing, on the contrary, is based on the idea that the individual itself is made possible by the community (the ecosystem, broadly conceived) and by its proper, balanced functioning; that the flourishing of the individual as a member of a community is contingent on the equilibrium of the whole; that actions, in this framework, are to be understood and evaluated in relation to their impact on the whole system and not just "in themselves"; finally, that their consequences are not entirely predictable because of the complexity of the system itself.

Moreover, the liberal approach seems inadequate for the purposes of providing guidance in a context (a "living community") characterized by the interconnectedness and mutual dependence of its members. Because if that is what we are, that is, natural beings – however sophisticated – living in connection to one another and to our environment, then guiding principles based on the opposite assumption will fail to even ensure that the interest of the individual will be protected, once we agree that its interest and its flourishing are contingent on the equilibrium of the system itself. An adequate ethics for this kind of framework, thus, is not an ethics that evaluates actions abstractly, in isolation from the context in which they are produced and which they affect. On the ecological view, actions should be judged and chosen by considering their global effect on the equilibrium of the ecosystem. In this sense, a right (or good) action will be one that contributes to the preservation of the equilibrium of the living community and to the improvement of the living conditions of its members, considered as a whole. A wrong (or bad) action, correspondingly, will be one that disrupts or compromises such equilibrium and that is responsible for the worsening of the living conditions of its members, considered as a whole. These are, obviously, just general criteria. Before I proceed to a more detailed discussion of their meaning and implications, one observation is in order.

The general rule I just proposed, insofar as it focuses on the consideration of the impact of our acting on the general equilibrium of the system, may be regarded as a consequentialist one. It may remind the reader, then, of the utilitarian approach that Mill, for example, uses as a basis to justify the reduction of some people's potential as a result of public competition or limited resources (the "greater benefit" of society as a whole). Despite apparent similarities between the two approaches, however, they differ in two important ways: first, my account does not regard the individual as the primary unit of analysis, and one that must be protected by the interference of society, as Mill's combination of liberalism and utilitarianism holds. On the contrary, as we saw, the ecological approach sees the living community of which the individual is a member as the primary unit of analysis and what makes the very existence and flourishing of the individual itself possible. Secondly, for utilitarianism the right action is one that aims at the maximization of utility, but this criterion is purely quantitative: the very notion of maximization refers to the arithmetic aggregation of individual utility in terms of pleasure or happiness. The consequences of acting on such calculation, however, may as well be negative or even destructive for the community and for the ecosystem as a whole; and as long as the aggregation gives a mathematically positive result, utilitarians will be satisfied. The account I propose, quite differently, aims to provide a *qualitative* criterion for the assessment of the consequences of our action, one that has to do with the *kind* of consequences of the actions we will choose, depending on the overall impact they will have on the living community and its environment. What this means is that not *any* equilibrium will do, but only one which ensures the development of most of the community members' potential, thus not just the development of human potential *on average*.

This aspect allows me to address a possible objection – a common one, indeed, in the discussion of consequentialist ethics – namely the problem of the scapegoat. One might pose the following problem: if the criterion for determining the rightness or wrongness of an action lies in the evaluation of is consequences, then such an ethical approach will justify the sacrifice (or abuse, or oppression) of an individual as long as such sacrifice produces positive consequences, in this case in terms of the actualization of the potential of the community. Two related features of my approach address this problem: first, as I just said, my approach considers the consequences of our actions in qualitative terms. The simple fact that the sacrifice of a member of the community could produce positive consequences for the community as a whole does not by itself make this sacrifice necessary or justified. Rather, this would depend on the kind of sacrifice, on the individual member, and on the kind of consequences their sacrifice would yield. Consequently, the one who presents this objection would have the burden of providing further details about the specific situation the objection refers to. Since the ecological approach to ethics proposes a qualitative evaluation of the consequences of our actions, it implies (and requires) that attention be paid to the details of the action itself. Consider the following example: someone placed a bomb in a school with 500 children and threatens to detonate it. Now imagine the terrorist is captured, but they will not reveal where the bomb is and how to defuse it. The only way we can save the children is by torturing the terrorist until they say where they placed the bomb and explain how to defuse it. In this case, since the terrorist constitutes an active agent of disruption (or destruction, to be more precise) of the equilibrium and flourishing of the community, their sacrifice would be justified in an ecological perspective. The criterion for the ethical evaluation of the sacrifice is related to the analysis of the details relevant to the situation, that is, in particular, the function of the "sacrificed" community member for the community itself

and the consequences of the sacrifice for the community as a whole. In other cases, however, the terms of the problem may be very different, and the answer my approach would offer would change accordingly. If the individual member whose sacrifice is being discussed does *not* threaten the equilibrium of the community, and if the consequence of their sacrifice would simply be (for instance) the further improvement of the conditions of *some* members of the community, then their sacrifice would not be justified within an ecological ethics. The sacrifice of some (healthy, unwilling) members of the community for the purposes of conducting medical experimentation on them, for example, would not be justified even if that could greatly benefit the community.

In addition, one may ask under what kind of consequentialism my approach falls, whether it focuses on the analysis and evaluation of individual acts or of the rule on the basis of which individual acts are selected among a variety of options. This is a key distinction within the consequentialist tradition, and I think it may be useful to clarify its terms and to say where, in the spectrum, my proposal can be situated. Types of consequentialism may differ on three accounts: first, their thesis about what makes an act morally wrong; second, what kind of procedure an agent should apply when deciding how to act; third, under which conditions we may evaluate an action as good or bad, and thus blame or praise the agent. Generally speaking,[31] the main difference between rule and act consequentialism concerns the first point, that is, how they define the rightness and wrongness of an action. For rule consequentialism the rightness of an act depends on its following a rule or set of rules which are justified by their consequences – or, in

[31] There are many kinds of consequentialist theories on both sides, and the differences between them are often very subtle. Here, I will focus on the main distinctions in order to map the theoretical options and show the reader where my approach can be situated. For an introduction to the topic, see B. Hooker, "Rule Consequentialism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, E. N. Zalta (ed.), Winter 2015 Edition. Available online at http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/consequentialism-rule/ (retrieved on April 10, 2016).

other words, a rule or set of rules whose acceptance will determine the best consequences. For act consequentialism, the rightness of an act depends on the consequences produced by the act itself. This means that for the act consequentialist an agent may act on the basis of a rule that is designed to maximize the consequences of their acts and still perform a morally wrong act if such act produces worse consequences than any of the alternative options. Most act consequentialists, however, endorse some form of rule consequentialism regarding the second of the aspects I listed above, namely the procedure they believe an agent should employ when deciding how to act. In fact, most consequentialists believe that applying a strict act consequentialist approach to the agent's process of deliberation would place an undue burden on the agent itself, because an agent may not always have (access to) the information needed to calculate the consequences of their acts or because it may be too onerous to obtain said information in relation to the overall "costs" associated to the decision to be made; a further reason is that the agent may make mistakes in calculating the consequences of their act, despite their best intentions.

I consider my approach a version of rule consequentialism. In particular, my approach proposes a general *end* – the well-being and flourishing of the ecosystem – but most of the effort is devoted to finding a solution to the fact that such end, such general ethical principle, is systematically violated, and that reality is characterized by the constant and pervasive reduction of the potential of human beings. The level at which it is situated, thus, is not that of the evaluation of individual acts on the basis of their consequences, but that of the evaluation of the rules or principles shaping our behavior; and its purpose is to promote behaviors and ways of thinking that can lead to, or can reasonably be aimed at, the attainment of the equilibrium of the community itself. In this sense, the most appropriate way to characterize my ethical proposal is

perhaps to define it as a teleological ethics. Thus conceived, my approach proposes a set of rules whose ultimate goal is to support and to further the development of the potential of each member of the ecosystem in a way that is compatible with the well-being of the ecosystem itself. This way, the general principle I laid out above can be specified and made more accurate: a right action is an action reflecting (or complying with) a set of principles that are in turn justified by their consequences, that is, by the fact that the acceptance and application of those principles promotes the general well-being.

For example, some of these rules will require that the agent acquire information about the specific circumstances in which their actions will take place; in addition, considering that the system in which the agent acts is dynamic and often changes in unforeseeable ways, the agent will also be required to constantly review their decisions and their conduct and to adjust them accordingly. As a result, the rules proposed by the ecological approach include the basis of their own flexibility and adaptability to a complex context. In addition, this approach may appear very demanding of the agent insofar as it acknowledges that it is likely that the agent will fail, given the nature of the circumstances and the scope of the moral responsibility the agent has in my view of violence. It does, however, also acknowledge the difficulty to manage the complex scenario that the ecosystem is – being characterized by pervasive, inevitable violence – and thus recognizes the need to develop resilience to our moral fallibility, without forgoing the task of providing *regulative* principles: my proposal *starts* from the premise that we will (most likely) never reach the ideal outcome – and it could not be otherwise, given the ontological framework I have depicted – and at the same time it offers some tools that can guide us in our action *as though* we could reach the ideal outcome. Let us see these tools in some detail.

4. *"Maximizing" Potentials, Minimizing Violence*

In what follows, I suggest an ecological approach to ethics, which will provide us with a guide for action in a context characterized by violence, the omnipresent and inevitable feature of our existence as human beings. The aim of this approach, as I mentioned in the previous section, is to shape our practice according to rules that preserve, if not even improve, the equilibrium of our ecosystem, our living community, and help it thrive. The central guiding principle of our actions should be the maximization of human potential in ways that are compatible with the well-being of our ecosystem.[32] In turn, this means that we should choose courses of action that, all things considered, allow for more potentials to be actualized, and for them to be actualized in the fullest way possible. But this is still a general characterization: we need much more than this in order to be able to apply such framework.

Let us recall, for a moment, my discussion of potentiality in the third chapter. There, I observed that the actualization of the potential of different individuals may create conflicts, because the space, time, and resources needed for such actualization may be insufficient for all of them. For the same reason, it is also difficult to actualize one single potential to the fullest. Finally, each of us has an infinite variety of directions in which we can possibly actualize our potential, but cannot possibly pursue all of them: as a consequence, we are forced to choose from that infinite variety and to act toward the actualization of only some of them by reducing, neglecting, or suppressing other directions of development. Since I defined violence as the reduction of the potential, a clear consequence of the view I defended in that chapter is that everything we do – to others or to ourselves – is necessarily violence. My aim in the next pages is to propose some criteria for assessing the morality of an action in a context in which whatever

[32] By using the term "maximization" I do not mean to reaffirm the validity of a purely quantitative criterion, but to emphasize the need to ensure the greatest level of development of the potential of the individuals constituting the human community.

we will do will amount to the reduction or suppression of our potential, or of that of other people, or some combination of both. Which reductions (or suppressions) of the potential are morally OK? Which reductions (or suppressions) of the potential are morally wrong? In applying the ecological approach we will be able to see that some reductions of the potential are justifiable or even necessary in order to enable other potentials to be actualized, whereas other reductions of the potential will be just wrong.

In order to further the actualization of human potential and to expand the well-being of the human ecosystem, I propose four central principles. These are not to be considered exhaustive or final, but as a tentative framework that will need to be complemented and expanded in order to be made more specific and more comprehensive. The principles are: (1) the acknowledgement of a hierarchy between capabilities and, as a consequence, the need to prioritize the development of the basic capabilities for all members of the community with respect to the higher, more complex capabilities; (2) the need to constantly acquire information about the context within which we act in order to be able to evaluate the consequences of our actions in terms of reduction of human potential; (3) the requirement that each action be constantly and actively justified with respect to other available options; (4) given the difficulty of controlling and predicting the consequences of our actions on the living community, the need to constantly revise our criteria for action and our choices and to adapt or adjust them if the context requires it. Relatedly, given that in this scenario moral failure is an extremely likely possibility, the need to develop resilience to it and to constantly revise our principles and conduct.

Let us examine these principles in more detail. The first requires that we recognize a hierarchy between different kinds of potentials and different directions in which our potential can be developed. Within the ecological approach I am proposing, the evaluation of the context in

which we act – our human aquarium – for the purposes of determining how we should act, and thus the morality of a given situation, involves taking into account the potential of all members of the community and inevitably making some choices regarding them. In other words, we need to decide which potentials should be given priority in order to achieve the well-being of the community as a whole. The very idea of establishing a hierarchy within the comprehensive set of capabilities we have seen in the previous chapter departs significantly from the way Nussbaum approaches the issue. In fact, in her discussion of the capabilities approach, she makes it clear that the individual capabilities are not negotiable, and that the development of one or more of them should not be traded for the development of another. This could only be, for Nussbaum, a temporary solution we accept in our progress toward a just society, but not a permanent feature of a just society:

> Although in practical terms priorities may have to be set temporarily, the capabilities are understood as both mutually supportive and all of central relevance to social justice. Thus a society that neglects one of them to promote the others has shortchanged its citizens, and there is a failure of justice in the shortchanging.[33]

For Nussbaum, thus, a just society should not (have to) decide which capabilities to develop – thereby neglecting some of them – but would value all of them equally and would ensure the development of each one of them. This idea, however, may pose a problem, or perhaps simply emphasize a methodological difference between Nussbaum's articulation of the capabilities approach and my proposal here. I certainly agree that a just society – what I have called a balanced living community – requires that all capabilities be developed, and it is also quite clear that our current social arrangement is anything but a just one, that is, one that ensures

[33] Nussbaum, "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements," 40. See also Ead., "The Cost of Tragedy: Some Moral Limits of Cost-Benefit Analysis," *The Journal of Legal Studies* 29 (2000), no. 2: 1005-1036.

the development of *all* the capabilities in Nussbaum's list in such a way that they support each other. I also agree with Nussbaum that prioritizing certain capabilities over others is necessary to achieve a just society. I do not believe, however, that it is meaningful to even talk about an ideal situation in which all capabilities will be developed, and about the need to consider all of them as equally important. Even if we assumed that such a just society were possible, however, it would be necessary to keep the hierarchy of capabilities in place in order to *maintain* justice within that society: otherwise, should a conflict arise over some kind of resource needed for the actualization of an individual's potential, we would not have a criterion for deciding how to proceed about it.[34] I believe, thus, that prioritizing some capabilities over others is necessary both to achieve and to maintain a just society.

The first principle for guiding our actions, thus, will require that we establish and maintain a hierarchy between kinds of potentials. Basic capabilities – for example, bodily health and integrity –constitute the condition of possibility for the higher, more complex capabilities. Nussbaum concedes this point, but does not think that a different normative force follows from it. I believe, on the contrary, that the primary criterion that should guide us is that we – both at the individual and at the collective level – prioritize actions which ensure the development of basic capabilities for all members of the community. Only once those capabilities have been developed will we be fully justified in choosing actions that support the development of higher, more complex capabilities.

If we translate this requirement in more concrete terms, this means that since each of our actions implies a choice between the (non-)actualization of different potentials, we will have to

[34] Perhaps, this difference in approach can be explained that Nussbaum's theory addresses concrete concerns in political theory and practice, not in moral theory, and thus her point here is aimed at ensuring that governments do not trade the capability for political participation, for example, for the capability for bodily integrity. I think, however, that the discourses of moral and political philosophy should not necessarily be separated, and that especially in this case they overlap significantly.

choose the action that is at least compatible with the development and flourishing of the community as a whole and thus, as a consequence, of its members. Such a criterion, obviously, presupposes (and constitutes the application of) a value judgment, a qualitative evaluation of the potential: in order to understand which of the possible courses of action we could undertake at a given moment is the best one, it will not be enough to just calculate the overall benefit for the individual members of the community itself. This way, by just "adding up" individual benefit, we will simply get the quantity of resources and opportunities available to the community *on average*, but we will not be able to determine if these resources and opportunities are distributed in a fair way and benefit the majority of its members or just a small subset of them, and so in a disproportionate, unfair way. On the contrary, a qualitative evaluation will involve an assessment of what *kind* of potential we are ensuring the development of.

Consider a small, relatively simple community like a household. More specifically, let us imagine a so-called "traditional" family constituted by a woman, a man, and two children. Ideally, an ecological community would establish a set of (flexible) rules for the management of the household and the roles and tasks of their members, so that each of them would be able to benefit from the space, the time, and the resources available within the community and so that, as a consequence, the community as a whole may flourish. On my account, an ethical arrangement will be one that enables each member to actualize their basic potentialities and that prioritizes them over other potentialities that may be developed or actualized. Specifically, in this arrangement the community will collectively work to enable its members to develop their basic capabilities so that more time and resources are available to the community as a whole (that is, to all of its members) to develop higher capabilities.

The traditional division of labor between the sexes in the traditional household, on the contrary, has determined an extremely unbalanced setting for the development of its members' capabilities, one that privileges the actualization of the potential of some of its members and subordinates the actualization of the potential of other members (women, usually) to it. Housework and childcare, traditionally, have been reserved to women, whose potential in other directions has thus been sacrificed in order to ensure that their husbands and children could develop both their basic and their higher, more complex capabilities. The traditional organization of the family, in this sense, is an example *in the negative* of how an ecological community focused on the well-being of the community as a whole would work.

The household example is a quite basic one, as it involves a limited-size community. It is useful, however, for the purposes of showing at a relatively simple level how choices about which potentials will be actualized can affect some members of the community in a disproportionate way if they are not guided by an ecological approach, which values each member's well-being and focuses on the community as a whole. Our society can be seen as a complex system constituted by many different kinds of communities, as an arrangement of multiple concentric *and* intersecting circles of different dimensions. If we transfer the same kind of ethical-ecological reasoning to communities larger than nuclear families, obviously, the evaluation of the ethical scenario will become a much more complicated operation. In order to appreciate this point, let us revisit one of the examples I discussed in the course of the preceding chapters: in order to enable the actualization of my intellectual potential – and thus in order to enable me to sit at this desk, right now, and write these pages – or even more in order to enable the actualization of the potential of individuals who are much more privileged than me – a whole system must be in place in which a large number of other individuals must necessarily live in

conditions of disadvantage, if not of serious deprivation, and which requires a large quantity of resources to be employed for this purpose. For me to be able to pay a relatively convenient price for the laptop on which I am typing these words, for example, and for this option to be available to a large number of privileged people in Western countries, it is necessary that the raw materials used in order to produce it be extracted intensively and at a low price, and that the workers assembling its parts be paid a very little amount of money and live and work in barely human conditions, in factories usually located in the Global South, where multinational corporations can make large profits by escaping the stricter environmental and labor laws of most Western countries. All of this, obviously, will benefit people like me and even more the stockholders, who will directly enjoy the profits of this system of production. Such a system, quite obviously, may be "stable," but it is definitely unbalanced from the point of view of an ecological ethics: in terms of the well-being of the community as a whole this is a bad system, one that privileges the well-being of a small subset of its members to the expense of the majority and of the environment. In this sense, the ecological approach would prescribe the complete restructuring of the organization of the community at all levels and an overall reevaluation of the priorities guiding its functioning. In terms of individual ethics, then, each member of the community must consider the greater implications of their actions and life choices in relation to the impact they have not only on their "surroundings," but also on larger communities, all the way to the global level. This means that the apparently innocent action of going to the store and buying a laptop – or any object, for that matter – has much larger implications than we are used to think in our everyday life, and should be evaluated in connection to those implications. We will see more about this when I will discuss the third principle, according to which we need to constantly

justify our actions against a variety of other options and with respect to the general aim of developing the potential of our living community.

Given the scope of the ethically relevant consequences of each individual's actions, the first principle is importantly linked to the second, whose purpose is to enhance the effectiveness of the former and to provide further guidance: each member of the community should acquire as much information as possible about the dimensions, components, and variables affecting our "ecosystem," so that one can adequately assess the implications of their actions. This, of course, does not guarantee that our actions will always further the well-being of the community, since our capacities are limited and it is difficult to predict the consequences of our actions at the level of the system as a whole: however, ensuring we know as much as we can about our ecosystem is one of the necessary conditions for the development of an awareness of the complex context in which we act.[35] In the example above, the decision to go to the store and buy a laptop must involve, among other things, educating myself about the processes and conditions of its production, the countries and the people involved, whether the company that produces it respects human rights in the country in which its factories are located and what its policies concerning the environment (including the disposal of electronic waste) are.

The third principle I would like to suggest as a guide for our actions derives from a further feature that characterizes my approach as a form of consequentialism and from the understanding of action I have proposed. In particular, as far as the latter is concerned, I said that we should regard the sphere of our action as extending to everything we do and not do, and thus to see every moment of our life as presenting us with a plurality of options, of possible choices

[35] This point applies in particular to individual agents. If we consider social and political agents, however, the requirement to acquire information about the details and implications of our decisions (that is, our collective policies) is much stronger, and since the capacity to control the consequences of such decisions is greater than the individual's, so will be the related expectations concerning their consequences.

regarding the way in which we will decide to act. Within a consequentialist framework, this point is expressed in terms of a comparative approach to deliberation, whereby choosing a course of action means comparing the possible actions one may choose to perform in a given context and evaluating them on the basis of the desirability (however one defines it) of their consequences. In more general terms, we may view our acting as "conferring existence" to only one of the possible options that are available to us at a given moment. Our choice and the subsequent action leave the other options un-actualized, sacrificing them to the only one that gains actuality. In this sense, we can conceive the chosen and subsequently performed action as implicitly including a negative aspect, since it is made possible only insofar as the other ways in which the agent could decide to actualize their conduct are negated.

> This does not mean, however, that the possibilities that have been sacrificed are reduced to nothing. On the contrary, they keep surrounding and accompanying the act as the negative condition which enabled its realization.[36]

This characterization of the nature of action has an important implication concerning our acting, namely that none of our acts is ever justified once and for all, and that, as I said before, (apparent) inaction is not sufficient to secure a neutral position, one that is safe from moral evaluation.[37] As a consequence, the third principle requires that each act be incessantly and actively justified against the other possible options, which still subsist "in the negative" beside the chosen act and demand proof of its legitimacy. A state of ethical stillness, where we can feel

[36] See F. Chiereghin, "La funzione dell'inconscio ne *Lo spirito vero* della *Fenomenologia dello spirito* e le dinamiche dell'inconscio nel *Simbolismo inconscio* delle *Lezioni sull'estetica* di Hegel" ("The Function of the Unconscious in the Chapter on *True Spirit* in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the Dynamics of the Unconscious in the *Unconscious Symbolism* in Hegel's Aesthetics"), Verifiche 35 (2006), no. 3:133-198, 137. In this article, the intrinsic negativity of action is discussed as an aspect of the negativity characterizing the structure of consciousness as a whole.

[37] Hegel seemed to have something similar in mind when he wrote that "Innocent […] is merely non-action, like the mere being of a stone, not even that of a child." G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Translated by A. V. Miller, with Analysis of the Text and Foreword by J. N. Findlay, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977, § 468.

secure about our conduct, is not a possibility in this context: on the contrary, it is necessary to constantly pay attention to the general sphere of our agency – the ecosystem, the living community – and to never interrupt our practices of deliberation and justification of our decisions. The latter practices, thus, in the same way as actions, can no longer be understood as "activities" to be differentiated from an otherwise neutral "flow" of morally non-relevant inactivity, but as an essential and stable component of the way we live our life.

The fourth and last principle is importantly related, and one may say, necessitated by the third principle, and requires that the agent be always ready to reexamine and amend their choices. Because at any moment – given that the context within which we act is the whole, which is in a process of constant, often unpredictable transformation, and that we may discover aspects of it that we previously ignored – any one of the choices we left un-actualized could acquire greater legitimacy than it had before and impose a revision (one limited to a single action or of a broader scope) of our conduct. As agents we should therefore be prepared to modify our decisions and actions, whenever possible. This also implies that, most likely, we will fail as moral beings: given these premises, it will be necessary to develop acceptance of this almost inevitable outcome and resilience to it, as well as to the idea that in most cases we will not be innocent.

Considered in its multiple aspects, the ecological approach to ethics is to be regarded as a holistic approach, one that takes into account the whole and its complexity (the communities of human beings, their ecosystem, and their relations) as the context of its application, and as an open and flexible approach that calls for a strong and constant commitment to the morality of one's own actions and the capacity to adapt it to the changing features of one's environment, whose equilibrium and flourishing is the primary ethical goal.

CONCLUSION

Writing a conclusion for a dissertation like this is an arduous task. Every fruitful reflection, as this has been (at least for me), does not find its proper conclusion in an actual closure, but rather in the opening of new avenues for reflection and of new conversations. Formulating my final thoughts, thus, feels like somehow imposing a stop at a point where new ideas are arising and new paths are developing. At the same time, however, these pages offer me the opportunity to highlight what I consider some important points that emerged in the course of this dissertation. To begin with, I think it would be worth to emphasize some aspects regarding in particular the nature of the discussion I presented in the chapters devoted to the ontology of violence and some possible applications of the account I offered in the third chapter. I regard my discussion of the ontology of violence as a dialectical discussion, and the definition I propose in the third chapter, in turn, as a dialectical definition. In order to understand this characterization, it may be helpful to recall the distinction between an analytical and a dialectical definition, as it is exemplified by the distinction between Aristotle's logic and Hegel's logic.[1] The former kind of definition proceeds by *genus* and *differentia*. First, it identifies the larger set of entities to which the *definiendum* belongs (the *genus*) thus separating it from other kinds of entities; subsequently, it distinguishes the entity from others within the same *genus* through its *differentia*, that is, a specific feature (or set of features) of the entity we want to define. Aristotle's definition of the human being as rational animal is a clear example of this way of defining an entity. The central feature of this kind of definition is that it understands meaning as a "stable entity, in a (stable)

[1] I am deeply indebted to Ermanno Bencivenga's discussion of this distinction in *Hegel's Dialectical Logic*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000.

relation of opposition with other similar entities."[2] Many accounts of violence work this way, namely by identifying what they regard as the stable meaning of the notion of violence, in opposition to what may seem similar to it, but must be carefully distinguished by it. Absence of clarity in such distinctions, as a consequence, constitutes a problem for analytical definitions.

A dialectical definition, by contrast, is one that sees difference, and thus contrasts between different meanings of a term, as a positive occurrence and as one that can be most productive for the understanding of the nature or meaning of an entity or a concept. Accordingly, the definition of a concept in Hegelian terms is based on the idea that a rich semantic field can be comprehended by incorporating all of the meanings that populate such field in the definition of the entity or the concept, as stages or moments in the development of the entity or concept that we are trying to define and understand. Rather than being characterized by stability and opposition, therefore, the dialectical definition of a concept is characterized by movement, by transitions and contrasts, and thus by a narrative structure. Such transitions and contrasts are not considered signs of incoherence or error in understanding a concept or entity, but as belonging to the nature of the thing itself. I see my discussion of the ontology of violence as dialectical precisely for this kind of reason: in the first chapter I presented the physicalist definition of violence, and showed that, insofar as it is considered in opposition to other definitions, it offers a limited account that runs intro contradictions and ambiguities. Such contradictions and ambiguities, in my view, are not a problem as long as they can be "reabsorbed" by a broader, more complex, dynamic – dialectical, indeed – account. The physicalist definition, however, cannot do this by itself, but needs to be complemented – or better, incorporated– by a different definition. In the second chapter I moved to the examination of a broader account of violence,

[2] Ibid., 8.

which seemed a better candidate insofar as it encompassed – in addition to acts of physical violence – forms of violence that harm individuals in different ways on the basis of economic, social, and political factors. The unfolding of that discussion showed that, although this was a better definition, it lacked a conceptual structure that could do justice to more subtle and sophisticated forms of violence affecting individuals at the level of their very humanity, and not only at the level of the material aspects of existence. In order to make room for these forms of violence, I worked with the definition of structural violence provided by Galtung and expanded it so that it could account for those forms of violence but also provide the framework within which every manifestation of violence could be understood.

One important advantage of a dialectical definition is that it remains dynamic and open: it tells us the *story* of a concept, and if it does its job accurately, it can guide us in understanding its unexplored manifestations or future stages. If it needs adjustment, however, for example because these manifestations or stages do not entirely fit into the story, it is open to being reshaped and reformulated to account for them. I believe this is a key feature of my account, and one that opens up new avenues for future developments of this discussion. As a consequence, I believe that on the basis of this account we can restructure our understanding of several kinds or forms of violence. The idea of re-reading physical violence in terms of the reduction of one's potential, for example, seems promising for the purposes of deepening our understanding of this kind of violence beyond the mere infliction of pain or exercise of force. The same holds for several forms of structural violence individuals suffer because of their gender, race, or disability. In addition, contemporary concerns about discursive and epistemic injustice or violence[3] may be formulated in terms of reduction or limitation of other people's potential.

[3] See for example M. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press 2007; K. Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing," *Hypatia* 26

These are just a few examples of the deeply political nature of this discussion: although ontology and ethics are separated discussions, in this work, it is clear that the implications of the former for the way we understand the world are significant. A discussion of the explicitly political dimension of violence, however, could not find room in this study. Questions about the legitimacy (or justifiability) of violence as a means of political struggle or as a response to violence play a crucial role within the debate about violence and have been at the center of the philosophical debate on violence especially in the second half of the Twentieth century.[4] I believe that this particular discussion may be importantly reframed on the basis of my account, in particular by considering questions of equilibrium and well-being of the human living community as emerging from the fourth chapter. Among the themes that I consider particularly interesting in the context of a political discussion of violence is the contrast between violence and nonviolence: in particular, one aspect of this debate that my account may help restructuring – or thinking anew – is the very nature of the distinction between violence and nonviolence. These are usually regarded as two opposed and irreconcilable modes of our acting and interacting at the social and political level. My account, by contrast, may support questioning the very distinction between them and would force us to understand the distinction between (what are currently seen as) violent and nonviolent acts simply by considering the kind of potential they restrict, how they restrict it, and whether they do so in a way and for reasons that can be justified in an ecological perspective. In this way, many of the acts that a physicalist definition would regard as nonviolent, and would thereby escape our attention, may redefined as forms of violence. A deeper discussion

(2011), no. 2: 236–57; R. Kukla, "Performative Force, Convention, and Discursive Injustice," *Hypatia* 29 (2014), no. 2: 440–57.

[4] See, among others, Arendt's *On Revolution*. New York: Viking Press, 1963 and *On Violence*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World 1970; Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity*, New York: Citadel 2000; Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press 2004; and Sartre's *Preface* to the latter book.

of this and other crucial dimensions of violence will be part of the future developments of this project.

The reference to the political dimension of violence brings me to the last point I would like to highlight in these concluding remarks, which concerns my proposal of an ecological ethics. The next stages of this project will definitely require a refinement of my ethical proposal. In addition to, or as part of such refinement, a broader discussion of the relation between my ecological approach to ethics and the many versions of ecological ethics that have been proposed in the context of environmental ethics will be in order. As I made clear in the fourth chapter, my approach is not primarily an approach concerning environmental ethics: rather, it employs a concept that pertains to the natural sphere in order to describe human communities and to suggest principles for the well-being and flourishing of such communities. The choice of this specific metaphor, however, is a conscious choice that aims at capturing an important fact, namely that human beings are natural beings that interact with one another and with their environment. Even if I do not explicitly address environmental concerns, thus, it is my conviction that my proposal can provide a helpful and productive framework for environmental ethics and its specific themes, in particular concerning the relation of human beings among them and to their environment,[5] and to the exploitation of its resources. Similar proposals are already present in the context of environmental ethics, but are primarily focused on the environment itself.[6] I believe that a further promising direction for the development of my view, thus, will involve a more extended examination and discussion of the concepts that may be used within an ecological approach to ethics – such as the concepts of ecosystem and super-ecosystem – and a

[5] Ecofeminist authors, for example, believe that there are important connections between the human domination of nature and the oppression of women. See, among others, the classic text by Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development,* London/Atlantic Highlands: Zed Books 1988.

[6] One exception in this sense is Hayward's view, based on the concept of ecological space. See Chapter Four, footnote 27.

deeper reflection on the implications of some important theories – such as chaos theory – for the understanding of our ethical space and of our ethical concepts. At the same time, I hope that my account will be able to further a conversation where the notion of violence is starting to be applied to discussions of environmental crisis and climate change.[7]

These pages have probably emphasized what I have *not* done more than what I have done in the course of this study. I believe, however, that it is important to recognize what lies ahead of us and what we can hope to do in the future. What I hope, for now, is to have laid the foundation for the future developments and applications of this research.

[7] S. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.

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APPENDIX

Martha Nussbaum's List of the "Central Human Capabilities"[1]

1. Life. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living.

2. Bodily Health. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.

3. Bodily Integrity. Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.

4. Senses, Imagination, and Thought. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason – and to do these things in a "truly human" way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid nonbeneficial pain.

5. Emotions. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development).

6. Practical Reason. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance.)

7. Affiliation.

A. Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and to show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.

B. Having the social bases of respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of nondiscrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin.

[1] M. Nussbaum, "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements," 41.

8. Other Species. Being able to live with concern for an in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.

9. Play. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.

10. Control Over One's Environment.

A. Political. Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association.

B. Material. Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason, and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.