Violence and Postmodernism: A Conceptual Analysis

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1. Introduction

The term "violence" is used by many postmodernists to refer to a wide array of phenomena. Deleuze, for example, describes as violence the relation between Plato's Forms and the concrete, changing entities of our world.[1] Kristeva refers to the separation of the mother's body and infant's body at birth as violent.[2] Baudrillard takes "the supremacy of technical efficiency and positivity, total organization, integral circulation, and the equivalence of all exchanges" of the global media and information culture to be violence.[3] In a section of his *Of Grammatology*, entitled "The Violence of the Letter," Derrida argues that there is "the violence of the arche-writing, the violence of the difference, of classification, and of the system of appellation."[4] According to Derrida, the conditions that allow for the conceptualization of everything, including violence, are themselves violent. (See also Derrida's *Writing and Difference*, where he writes that speech must have an element of violence to it in order to be meaningful.[5]) Judith Butler agrees with him and suggests that concealing the violence that she and Derrida find in

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[1] Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. M. Joughin (New York: Zone, 1990), pp. 169-70.

[2] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. L. S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 9-10.

[3] Jean Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Global," trans. F. Debrix, *CTheory*, May 20, 2003, accessed online at: http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=385#bio2.

[4] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 110.

[5] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 147-48.

conceptualization is itself violence.[6]   Monique Wittig writes that there was violence at the core of her effort to find a new form of writing because it aims at shocking the reader.[7]   And Lyotard asserts that since his book *L'Économie Libidinale* does not lend itself to a dialogue between author and reader, it "perpetrates a kind of violence."[8]   Other examples abound.

I will argue here that such sweeping usages of the term "violence" are highly problematic.   I suggest that they overstretch the meaning and connotations of the term and thereby distort it.   Moreover, they dull the sensitivity to moral distinctions.   Such usages also have a propaganda-like effect on some people's thinking and weaken their ability to weigh carefully the advantages and disadvantages of the phenomena being referred to. Perhaps some phenomena that have not been traditionally considered violent should be described as such, but this should be the product of careful thought and argumentation rather than what sometimes seems to be offhanded assertion.

2. Characteristic Features of Violence

It is probably impossible to present an exhaustive and exclusive, clear-cut definition of violence.[9]   Hence, I will present here merely some characteristics typical of phenomena usually referred to as violent.   These qualities should not be understood as necessary or sufficient conditions of violence; not all need appear in any instance of violence.   However, they are all typical of violence.

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[6] Judith Butler, "A Note on Performative Acts of Violence," *Cardozo Law Review* 13, no. 1 (1991), p. 1304.

[7] Monique Wittig, "Some Remarks on *The Lesbian Body*," tr. N. Shaktini, in *On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, Political, and Literary Essays*, ed. N. Shaktini (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005), p. 45.

[8] Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. W. Godzich (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 4.

[9] For some suggestions and discussions of such definitions, many of which conflict with each other, see, e.g., Eric R. Brady, *Coping with Violent Behavior* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 1993), p. 2;   Elizabeth Stanko, "Violence," in *The Sage Dictionary of Criminology*, ed. E. McLaughlin and J. Muncie (London: Sage, 2001), pp. 316-17; L. B. Curzon, "Violence," in *Dictionary of Law*, 6th ed. (Harlow, UK: Pearson, 2002), pp. 444-45; Giuliano Pontara, "The Concept of Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 15, no. 1 (1978), pp. 20 and 27; Dean G. Kilpatrick, "What Is Violence Against Women? Defining and Measuring the Problem," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 19, no. 11 (2004), pp. 1209-34.

We see violence as a type of aggression. Not all aggressive behavior is violent (sarcastic comments, or passive-aggressive silence, or some kinds of gossip may be aggressive without being violent), but we would not usually typify behavior as violent if we do not think it is aggressive.

We also tend to take violence to be predominantly physical. When we overhear, for example, someone saying, "I do not want to go there; it is a violent place" or "John behaved violently again," we usually visualize or assume physical rather than verbal behaviors. Of course, we do sometimes use the terms "verbal violence" or "psychological violence," but the very need to precede "violence" with "verbal" or "psychological" suggests that we ordinarily take violence to be physical.

Violence is frequently thought of also as unruly, as conduct that oversteps permitted limits. Most of us will not describe an organized, official, and supervised judo competition as violent, although the parties to the match do push, pull, and throw each other to the ground. However, were we to be told that one of the competitors in such an organized judo match started to behave violently, we would assume that that competitor (perhaps overcome by frustration or rage) started to push and pull the other competitor in *contravention* of the rules. This feature of violence has to do with another of its characteristics: the legal and social norms are such that, for most of us, the use of violence is forbidden in most circumstances. Except for rare cases of self-defense in extreme situations, those of us who resort to violence break both the law and, in many circles, the social code. Max Weber famously says that the state keeps the monopoly of the use of legitimate violence to itself.[10] Thus, state and society prohibit the use of violence by almost all people, and even those specifically authorized by the state to employ violence, such as the police and military, are restricted in terms of permitted circumstances, objects, types, and degrees of violence that they may use.

We also typically take violence to be harmful. When we hear that violence has occurred, we often assume that some harm transpired or at least was likely to transpire. Thus, if we were to be informed that violence occurred at a certain pub last night, we would assume that some property was damaged or that some people were hurt. Were we to be told that violence occurred at that pub but that no damage occurred, it would be to our surprise; we would likely inquire by what lucky chance damage was averted or perhaps even doubt that what transpired was indeed violence. Some of the typical harms that violence generates are, of course, pain (hence, we frequently say that people *suffer* violence), disability, death, and much less seriously but very commonly, destruction of property.

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[10] Max Weber, *Politik als Beruf [Politics as a Vocation]* (München and Leipzig: Verlag von Duncker und Humbolt, 1926), p. 8.

Violence also has strong connotations of coerciveness and restriction of autonomy. People do not like to experience violence inflicted on them, and those who do suffer violence typically undergo the experience against their will. Violence impinges on people's autonomy not only when it is actual, but also when it is potential, for it can be used as a threat or sanction that impels people to behave in ways they do not wish to act. The threat of violence has frequently been employed to enslave, humiliate, and oppress people. The link between violence and coerciveness is also apparent in the reluctance of some to describe fully consensual sadomasochistic sexual relations as violent; and some of those who do characterize such relations as violent often hold them not to be genuinely consensual.

Violence is also frequently taken to be an *intentional* infliction of harm. A person who is insufficiently cautious while carrying a ladder and thus unintentionally harms—even severely—another person is not usually described as having behaved violently.

We usually have a strong negative emotional reaction to violence; we often consider it a serious and highly condemnable evil. Even in the few cases in which we take violence to be unavoidable (for example, some instances of self-defense), we think that it should be employed to the most minimal and necessary extent. This relates to our inclination to see violence as morally wrong by default; the burden of proof is borne by those who claim that a certain exercise of violence is necessary and hence acceptable. Our fundamental negative reaction to violence can be sensed also in our assumption that something bad happened when we hear of an instance of violence. Likewise, the description of a person, a behavior, or a place as violent is highly pejorative. Usually, we will sooner excuse or forgive cases of manipulation, cheating, lying, embezzlement, stealing, or other types of corruption before forgiving violence. This attitude is reflected in many codes of law, where acts of violence are often punished more severely than many other behaviors. And it is commonly accepted that an act has to meet a certain threshold and have a sufficiently significant impact in order to be considered violent. There may be different views about what this threshold amounts to, but we do not usually call something "violent" if we do not regard it or its impact to be severe enough. Thus, for example, we may all agree that perhaps person A should not have lightly touched person B on the shoulder, but if it is a soft touch, we will not consider it violence.

Violence, then, is not just another one of those many unpleasant phenomena that we would be glad to see fade away. We frequently react to it more sharply, more fearfully, and as a more dramatic evil than many other wrongs. Not all phenomena that we find disagreeable, aggressive, or harmful constitute violence; phenomena may be wrong in any number of ways, warranting rejection, condemnation, or disagreement, without amounting to violence.

3. The Use and Abuse of "Violence"

The features discussed above are typical of violent phenomena, but do not enable one to draw a sharp line between violent and non-violent phenomena. Difficulties in determining, in certain cases, whether a particular phenomenon is or is not violent relate to the number, type, and degree of the characteristics mentioned above. However, wherever that line between violent and non-violent phenomena does in fact lie, I do not think that one could plausibly describe as violent the phenomena referred to by that name in the postmodernist texts mentioned above.

Derrida's suggestion is probably the strongest candidate. Perhaps he is right that without the mechanisms that enable us to conceive concepts and notions in general, including the notion of violence, we could not have conceived of what anything, including violence, is, and violence would have not existed (at least in some sense) for us. And perhaps because of this and other reasons there might be something harmful in these conditions of conceptualization (although it should be acknowledged that conceptualization also bestows many important benefits). Furthermore, perhaps the limitation inherent to conceptualization can be understood as restricting autonomy in some way. But even if these two characteristics of violence are true of conceptualization to some degree, the other characteristics are not applicable: conceptualization is not physical, unruly, intentional, or aggressive; we do not wish that conceptualization did not occur and we usually do not have a very strong negative emotional reaction to it nor see it as a very serious evil. The same is true for Butler's addition that concealing the violence in the conditions of conceptualization is itself violent.

Likewise is the case with Kristeva's example; it is surely true that the termination of the symbiosis between infant and mother in natal delivery is a very powerful experience. But although it is (also) physical and is an important and serious experience that elicits a strong emotional reaction, it does not manifest any of the other characteristics typical of violent acts. This is also the case regarding the technical efficiency and total organization of the global information and media culture, as discussed by Baudrillard; they may be problematic in all sorts of ways, but they are not in themselves violent. The same is true of the other examples of postmodern usages of violence mentioned above, such as the shock readers may experience upon encountering a new form of writing in Wittig, or the relation between concrete entities and Platonic Forms that Deleuze describes.

Of course, one could disagree and respond that, in one's view, the degree of harm and restriction of autonomy in Derrida's conditions of conceptualization *is* sufficient to regard them as violent. The same could be argued with respect to natal separation, the failure to enhance the author-reader dialogue, and all of the other examples. Or one could maintain that,

although it is true that the phenomena in question would not ordinarily be described as violent, one can choose to expand stipulatively the notion "violence" to cover these phenomena. Such moves would be problematic, though, for they would render violent a plethora of other phenomena along with the specific phenomena in question. Any phenomenon to which the characteristics of violence apply as they do to natal separation, failure to foster the author-reader dialogue, or conceptualization would be deemed violent as well. Under these conditions, most phenomena should be described as violent and it is not clear what phenomena would not be described as such.

Seeing such a wide assortment of phenomena as violent would undermine the distinction between what amounts to violence and what does not. This would be problematic for a number of reasons. First, it would diminish the diversity of our moral world, melting away the specificity of violence and the distinctions between it and other phenomena. Of course, we could call all (or almost all) phenomena "violence" and then reintroduce all of the distinctions used to differentiate between violence and other notions, perhaps by other names. But the advantage is not clear of dissolving the differences between violence and other notions and then reintroducing them using new terms.

Second, referring to phenomena as violent suggests to many that these phenomena cannot legitimately be supported or even argued for and considered. Labeling many phenomena "violence" diminishes the likelihood of rational, responsible discussions of the advantages and disadvantages of these phenomena.

Third, referring to lightly negative phenomena (or even to positive phenomena) as violence may diffuse the wrongfulness that we do and should attach to violence.[11] If violence is indeed all those not-so-terrible phenomena like failing to enhance author-reader dialogue, or the technical efficiency of the media culture, or the conditions of conceptualization, then perhaps we need not oppose it with such vehemence. This is even more so when positive phenomena such as birth, or replacing old forms of writings with new ones, are referred to as violence. Inflationary use of strong terms devalues them. It may be that in the first stages of using a strong term to refer to milder phenomena, the former's characteristics are attributed to the latter, but not vice versa. With the passage of time, however, the weakness of the connotations of the lighter phenomena also infiltrates the stronger term; the stream of connotations becomes a two-way flow, and the stronger term becomes diluted. But we do want people to treat violence as the evil it

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[11]   Note that although Derrida, Butler, Deleuze, Baudrillard, and Lyotard use "violence" as a pejorative term (even if they apply it to lightly negative phenomena), Wittig and perhaps Kristeva do not even employ it as a pejorative term.

frequently is. Even those who use the term "violence" to describe only lightly negative phenomena recognize its special seriousness; otherwise, they would have not chosen *it* to describe non-violent phenomena, but instead would have employed other terms. Yet, by presenting most phenomena as violent, they are stripping the notion of the special meaning it originally held, and for which they initially chose to use it rather than another notion.

Some authors may argue that, notwithstanding the above, their specific employment of "violence" to describe what appear to be lighter phenomena is, in fact, justified. Such arguments can, of course, be legitimate, but they should be explicit and detailed, presenting one's characterization of violence and showing why a certain seemingly lighter phenomenon should be described as violence. Such discussions should also inquire into whether that expanded use would not, under pain of inconsistency, render as violent also many other, quite non-dramatic and harmless phenomena, including those which one would not wish to dub by that name.

Employing strong, dramatic terms for phenomena deserving only more moderate descriptions can be found in other spheres as well. Sometimes, mediocre students are referred to as "A-level" students, decently tasting food is referred to as exceptionally delicious, and mildly unpleasant experiences are referred to as horrible. But we do wish to retain the specific meaning of these notions lest we lose important cognitive and practical distinctions. We do want to be able to say that some students are indeed excellent, some experiences are horrible, and some wrongs are violent. Pamphleteers, propagandists, lawyers, politicians, and advertisers frequently employ stronger terms than necessary. This is an effective tactic: over-dramatization tends to attract attention and impress people, sometimes leading them to accept arguments with less resistance. This may have happened in some postmodernist discussions with uses of the term "violence" such as those mentioned above. I suggest, however, that as philosophers we should try our best to refrain from such practices.[12]