

Language and Violence



Paul van Tongeren

Not that long ago, there was a war in Yugoslavia. NATO was using considerable force in an attempt to prevent Serbia from pursuing its ethnic policy in Kosovo. This use of violence was justified on humanitarian grounds after political and diplomatic pressure had been applied for many months in an attempt to persuade the regime in Belgrade to change its position. However, the talks finally broke down and NATO turned to violence, since actions speak louder than words.

With regard to what we refer to as ‘senseless violence’, often street violence targeting innocent citizens, a notable factor is that this is often provoked when the victim calls the perpetrator to account. Joes Kloppenburg, Meindert Tjoelker and Kerwin Duinmeijer are just three high-profile names among the many dozens of anonymous victims of senseless violence in the Netherlands in the 90 s. Joes, Meindert and Kerwin, and possibly many more of them, were attacked and murdered by people whom they had confronted about their conduct.

These are two examples of violence that affects us deeply, and both examples suggest a link between violence and language, albeit in a contrasting manner. Philosophers work with words. As we discuss and contemplate the theme of violence, we probably feel a greater sense of powerlessness than we do when discussing other themes. This powerlessness is probably due to the nature of the theme of violence and the nature of the activity with which we intend to address it, namely thought and speech—in other words, language.

It has been pointed out that thinking and speaking about violence is paradoxical. This is true for at least two reasons. First, violence, like evil in general, appears to be characterised by absurdity and irrationality. If violence is characterised by its

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confliction with rationality, it will be difficult to comprehend—in other words, the more we think we understand it, the more elusive it may become. The second reason is even more persuasive. As C. Verhoeven and others have often pointed out, violence is not a subject that we can contemplate freely, something that we can think *about*, but something that we are *against* and thus think *against* (Verhoeven, 1967). While we normally look *towards* the phenomenon under consideration, in the case of violence we seem to look *away* from it. We are therefore strongly prejudiced, or to put it more kindly, we have a strong engagement.

Violence seems primarily to demand that we combat it rather than reflect on it. But how can we be sure that our battle against violence is not in itself violent, or whether in fact it needs to be in order to succeed? And what does that imply for our engagement? What does it mean if we have a violent urge to combat violence? What is violence if it is both the target and the weapon? However engaged we may be, we must not shy away from reflecting on what violence actually is. More importantly, we must avoid confusing the question of what violence is and why people feel compelled to use it with the question of what we can do to combat it.

Perhaps we can easily resolve the paradox of using violence to combat violence by distinguishing between different types of violence. We can distinguish the violence of war and senseless street violence, but also the violence of education. In Plato's allegory of the cave, which describes the path along which humankind can escape from the prejudices and false beliefs of prevailing opinion, it is notable that he frequently uses terms that elucidate how violent this liberation would be. True knowledge seemingly has a need of violence. Besides the violence of education and the physical violence of battle, we can distinguish other forms of violence, such as the devastation of overpowering experience or the destructive power of the natural world. This implies a second warning that must be heeded if we seek to contemplate violence: we should not readily assume that that the word violence is always being used to refer to the same concept. At the same time, scientific or pseudoscientific definitions of all the different forms of violence and their preconditions will not suffice. In other words, we cannot avoid asking the philosophical question of whether there is an all-inclusive notion that encompasses all forms of violence.

The more pervasive a concept is, the more difficult it is to define, since definition is always a limiting factor. *Omnis determinatio est negatio*. Anyone aiming to define something as all-encompassing as violence will have to search for a contrasting concept with which to delimit it. This is where language comes in. Violence and language (the instrument of reason and logos) appear to be diametrically opposed and therefore to define each other, which is why we often encounter this opposition in the history of the philosophy of violence. Incidentally this position reinforces the paradox mentioned above. To the extent to which language and violence are opposites, if indeed they are opposites, we will always distance ourselves from violence simply by speaking, as a result of which violence will always remain dumb, inaccessible to words, and we will never resolve the paradox. However, this cannot be a reason to refrain from contemplation. On the contrary, philosophers have tended to devote the closest and most constructive attention to those questions to which they could have known in advance (and usually did) that answers could not be found.

This introduction sets the scene for what I would like to do next. Based on three short texts by three contemporary French authors, I aim to explore several avenues in pursuit of answers to the unanswerable question of what violence actually is, in a quest to attain the unattainable and conquer violence. These three authors, in chronological order, are Eric Weil, Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur, who will be discussed here in reverse order. I have resisted the temptation to add Jacques Derrida, with his essay *Violence et métaphysique* (1964), as a fourth author. I will not be guided solely by their writing but will analyse the texts on the basis of a framework that sprang to mind while reading their work. I will therefore simplify their writing to fit this structure. I will use them freely for my own story, interpret them in my own words, and in doing so will subject them to violence. So be it.

Language Versus Violence

Over 30 years ago Paul Ricoeur wrote an introduction to a discussion on violence, which, together with an article by Eric Weil, was published in 1967 entitled *Violence et Langage* (Ricoeur, 1967). It forms a useful starting point for our argument, firstly because Ricoeur explicitly thematises the general concept of violence, secondly because he does this in the context of the opposition between violence and language, and thirdly because he explicitly addresses the practicality of a philosophy of violence.

Ricoeur considers it to be the philosopher's task to define the concept of violence in such a way that all forms of violence are incorporated in that definition. Although some will object that this precludes discussion of specific concrete problems (in the 1960s Ricoeur would have been thinking about the violence of repression and revolution, whereas nowadays humanitarian intervention and senseless street violence tend to be more topical), in order to discuss such problems it is ultimately important to know what we mean when we refer to them in terms of violence. The common denominator is the violent character of widely differing phenomena such as the violence of nature—as embodied by a hurricane—on the one hand and the interpersonal violence of murder on the other, as well as the many other forms of human violence that lie in between.

Before I present Ricoeur's answer to that question I should like to make another point. It is important to recognise that almost all human violence falls in the intermediate zone between the two extremes. In order to understand this we must realise that the violence of nature is found not only in phenomena such as hurricanes, floods and volcanic eruptions but also in our own violent nature, in emotions such as desire, fear and hatred. Who has mastery of their own violent nature? Who can guarantee that any violence they exercise will remain within the bounds of their own intentions and will have no effect other than that intended? The fact that violence always retains some of its origin as a force of nature puts the role of intention into perspective if this origin is called upon to legitimise the use of violence. Human violence is always a

combination of the violence exercised and the violence experienced, both internally and externally.

This further complicates the question of what connects such widely differing concepts. What is the common thread unifying the different forms of violence? Ricoeur's answer is that this unification lies in the opposition between violence and language: '*Ce qui fait l'unité de l'empire de la violence, c'est qu'il a le langage pour vis-à-vis*' (1967, p. 87). Along the entire line, from one end to the other, the two concepts adjoin '*comme deux contraires exactement ajustés chacun à l'extension entière de l'autre*' (id.). Here Ricoeur is referring to language not in the sense of linguistic structure comprising vocabulary and grammar (*langage*) but rather in the form of discourse (*discours*) and ultimately rational argument. Where there is discourse, in the extent to which discourse is used, there is no violence, and where violence is used, in the extent to which violence is exerted, there is no discourse. An argument for violence is therefore paradoxical, and we are struck dumb by savage violence. The aim of violence in its pure form is to silence and objectify the other.

This delineation between language and violence provides some clarification in relation to the previous question of how to unify all the widely differing forms of violence. Even the violence of nature only exists as such in the mind of man, who is left speechless. Humans who lose themselves in violence may be labelled as bestial, but that does not necessarily mean that animals acting in a similar way can be labelled as violent. Pure violence may be associated with the absence of language, but that absence must actually be discernible. If language is completely missing, and the contrast with language cannot be made because there is no linguistic expression, there can be no question of violence either. It is the opposition with language that makes violence what it is. The notion of a discernible absence introduces a dialectic that is discussed in more detail in the work of Eric Weil in particular. Ricoeur does not enter into this discussion in any depth, but rather shows that this absolute opposition between language and violence is, of course, an abstract concept.

In the real world, the manifestations are almost always in hybrid form. Human violence is always interwoven with language and human discourse is always interwoven with violence. Ricoeur examines the latter observation in three different spheres: the world of politics, where this phenomenon is self-evident, the sphere of poetry, where it is seemingly improbable and the realm of philosophy. In all of these spheres, he underlines the intermingling of what he calls *expression* and *sens*, albeit in highly varying proportions. The fact that a person seeks to express himself and, whether issuing orders or evoking ideas, always acts within assumed frameworks using defining words alludes to the violence inherent in every form of expression, but since this person also seeks to impart information and offer clarification with his words, this remains discourse and is even the voice of reason in every instance of violence.

But what is the purpose of constructing an absolute opposition between language and violence only to subsequently acknowledge that actually only hybrid forms exist, and that all violence contains an element of reason and all discourse retains an element of violence? Ricoeur's answer is that this absolute opposition lays the foundation for establishing an ethics of violence, or rather how to handle violence. The

absolute opposition between violence and discourse provides a basis for answering the practical question of how we should deal with the inevitable reality of violence. These ethics are summarised by Ricoeur in three *modestes règles*:

1. The first rule is simply to be aware of the absolute opposition. It is important to adhere to the essential principle that violence and language are polar opposites, even though this principle may be formal and still hollow. This principle must be acknowledged in order to recognise violence when it occurs but also to resort to violence if there is no other option. However, this allows violence to be concealed, to be defended as if it belonged in the realm of reason and dialogue. Whoever resorts to violence—and Ricoeur acknowledges that this is sometimes unavoidable—must accept a certain level of culpability, even though according to Ricoeur this may be limited (*culpabilité limitée*). After all, calling a crime a crime is the first step on the road to salvation.
2. The second rule is to apply the non-violent nature of discourse as an imperative rather than merely as a formal truth—not out of blindness to the inevitability of violence or to the violence inherent in discourse, but in order to prevent violence from ever becoming total. “‘Thou shalt not kill’ is always true even when it is not applicable’ (Ricoeur, 1967, p. 93). The advocacy of non-violence is always worthwhile in a world in which violence is sometimes necessary. It occupies a meaningful position in the dialectic between inclination and responsibility.
3. The third rule is to attempt to banish violence from discourse as far as possible by respecting the plurality of language and manners of speaking. There is the language of calculating reason, but also that of totalising reason, prophetic appeal and mythical invocation.

Ricoeur’s answer to the question of what we should do to combat violence is pervaded by the realisation that violence is unavoidable, but that is precisely why it is so important to make every effort to adhere to the formal and idealistic division and the opposition between violence and language.

Elementary Discourse Versus Totality Of Violence

In the first place it is primarily the necessity and universality of violence that Emmanuel Levinas emphasises in his article. First published in 1953, entitled *Liberté et commandement* (Freedom and Command in the English translation) (Levinas, 1987, pp. 15–23). He introduces violence through an analysis of the act itself. An act can be defined firstly in terms of the degree to which one can say that an individual is acting *on his own agency*, the degree to which he is not the helpless plaything of external forces but is rather the origin of those forces, and secondly in terms of the extent to which an individual *actually effectuates something*—in other words, he does not keep his intentions within himself but puts them into effect in situations in the outside world. In the latter case, the more resistance offered by the outside

world, the more powerful the effect. Actions are more powerful if the agent imposes his will on a stubborn stone and achieves the desired result than if he meets with no resistance and simply gives a gentle push to an already rolling stone. It is therefore not necessarily a hard object such as a stone that offers the greatest resistance but rather an active entity that seeks to exert its own influence: another freedom. I must therefore conclude that an act in the strongest sense of the word can be considered to be a command, or even subordination, or violence. War is the normal state of affairs for beings that engage in deliberate acts (in other words: mankind). Violence is not simply the prerogative of mankind, it also characterises us, since it is the clearest and most powerful expression of humanity in the sense of having freedom and the ability to perform deliberate acts.

The problem this presents is the problem of political ideology since the modern age. Up to now this analysis by Levinas is not original in any way. Hobbes's statement that a man is a wolf to another man (*homo homini lupus*) makes a similar argument: it is man's humanity, or in this case this particular aspect of his humanity, that makes him a wolf to another man. The other side of man's humanity, namely reason, has been propounded as a counterweight to this unavoidable violence, not only since the time of Hobbes but indeed since Plato. The radical nature of Levinas's analysis lies in his suspicion of all these proposed remedies for violence.

The first of these is the proposition that violence is ultimately ineffective. Although it is possible to force another person to do one's bidding, the other always has the option of continually refusing and in that sense putting up continued resistance. And if he is killed for resisting, his refusal perpetuates. Murdered opponents are often a killer's most persistent persecutors. Against this proposition, Levinas first argues that many tyrants are not too concerned about this implied limitation of their power and that victims of tyrannical violence rarely reap any benefits from their indomitable defiance. Their unremitting freedom to refuse is no more than an awareness of their subjugation. The victims of senseless street violence in our society also refused to submit and that was their undoing. Perhaps they are still announcing their refusal through their public profile but we only know the names of a handful of victims, and many more have died in vain. In addition, it remains to be seen how long we will continue to remember those few names, what effect this memory will have, and how fragile the memory will be. What remains of the powerful protest that was expressed during the White March in Belgium after serial killer and child molester Marc Dutroux was arrested?

Levinas's second argument against this proposition is even more radical. He points out that violence can even overcome this obstacle of resistance. This is where language explicitly comes to the fore. Violence can make use of seductive language and can violate freedom without giving the impression of doing so. Many forms of structural violence probably work this way. Every day we are forced to adopt all kinds of patterns, partly through the advertising and media that control our lives, while being under the illusion that we are choosing the patterns ourselves. Real violence works through language, brainwashing the victim into believing that he actually wants what is being forced upon him. The claim by some philosophers that violence is ultimately fruitless is refuted by Levinas, who points out its effectiveness.

The second proposed remedy to combat violence is that of the rationality of rules and laws. Allowing ourselves to be bound by sensible laws is similar to the way in which Odysseus protects himself against the seductive violence of the sirens by having himself tied to the ship's mast before their seductive powers can take effect. True freedom listens to the laws and protects itself against unreasonable violence by subjecting itself to its own rules of reason. However, notwithstanding the paradoxical nature of a freedom that subjugates itself, it is clear that the concrete reality of this self-protection all too easily leads to renewed violence. Odysseus screams at his men to untie him. In the same way, we rarely perceive the laws of the state and the rules of the institutes in which we work as a form of self-protection. It is often quite the opposite, not only because we are victims of our own violent nature which resists the reins of reason, but also because the rules of reason become violent themselves. Civil servants devise new rules aimed at preserving old rules and at protecting themselves as protectors of the rules. Administrators are constrained by an organisational fervour that threatens to destroy that which requires organisation. Although it is possible to espouse the myth that we have all cooperated in establishing the rules that now subjugate us, that myth often utterly fails to convince even the less free spirited. It is all too easy to violently pervert the rationality of the common good, but this rationality in itself is inevitably perceived as being violent.

It therefore appears that Levinas is incorporating language and reason into violence, as if nothing exists outside violence. However, this reveals the paradoxical reality that, by absorbing everything with which it comes into contact, violence actually undermines itself. Violence is constantly focused on overpowering the other but as a consequence the more it succeeds, the more it is eroded. The more comprehensive the conquest of the other, the less significant the conquered. This dynamic is even more clearly evident in the problem of acknowledgement, whereby the extortion of acknowledgement from another actually forfeits any such acknowledgement. An act of violence requires an adversary, but the appearance of the adversary challenges the violent pursuit of power. In reality this paradox manifests itself as an endless progression in which every power seeks a new challenge, a new enemy.

The solution proposed by Levinas is well known. He attempts to point to an alterity that on the one hand is genuine otherness but on the other hand does not exist in the form of a conquerable obstacle, as a force against which one's strength can be gauged. In the words of Levinas, it is 'a being becoming naked, an unqualified substance breaking through its form and presenting a face' (1987, p. 103). And this is where, despite his far more radical confirmation of violence, Levinas reverts again to the opposition between violence and language. Although the face speaks, it is not what it says that provides the counterbalance. Everything that is said can be understood and in that sense can be appropriated. Levinas is referring here to a form of speech that precedes all discussion or consideration. It does not discuss but rather it addresses, and this elementary language is the only way to break down the totality of violence. As a result the opposition between language and violence is not only maintained but, by becoming more extreme, is in danger of losing its practical significance. What does this resistanceless power signify in relation to international conflict among peoples, street violence, or the violent structure of the technological

and economic order? Although it is not entirely insignificant, it merely provides a reminder that the universe of violence is not closed. This is not unimportant, but we should set our sights higher. We should aim to acquire a more effective tool for combating violence than merely a prophetic voice.

A Question of Degree

Perhaps this can only be achieved by putting the contradiction between violence and language, or more specifically the exclusivity of this contradiction, into perspective. In order to investigate this possibility, I conclude with an analysis of the previously mentioned text by Eric Weil (1967). Like Ricoeur, Weil takes the opposition between violence and language as a starting point, but in contrast to Ricoeur he places a far clearer emphasis on the connection created by this opposition. Language and violence are conjoined as a result of their opposition. That is why a phenomenon such as violence can only exist for humans, who are the only creatures to have language and logos. Although like ourselves animals are also subjected to what we call the violence of nature, they do not comprehend this as such. This is because, as far as we know, man is the only creature to contemplate the meaning of life, to seek its sense or significance, for which purpose it needs language. However, violence is a senseless phenomenon, and in that sense it is 'dumb'. It is not so much that senseless violence is a particular category of violence, but rather that senselessness is a defining characteristic of violence. But only a creature that possesses language can identify dumbness as being dumb, and only a creature that searches for meaning can acknowledge absurdity. Violence does not exist without man, but does this also imply that man does not exist without violence? Is man violent by definition? And does this mean that the battle against violence is futile? I suspect that Eric Weil ultimately answers that question in the affirmative but without sounding cynical. For the purpose of clarification I follow the development set out by Weil from this already dialectic starting point, a development in which the pursuit of sense and the resistance of senselessness are considered in conjunction. In this dialectic development we will recognise the different forms of violence presented here, even though Weil does not refer to these forms in so many words.

In the first phase of this development, man overcomes the violence and resistance of nature through subjugation based on the counterforce of labour. At the same time this enables him to integrate into the wider realm to which he perceives himself to belong. Nature and the human project ideally exist in perfect harmony. Ripples in this relationship on an individual level—such as differences in harvest yields—are ironed out within the community. Violence has no place in this process, and anyone who rejects the communal harmony will be banished. The language of the community ('that is how we do things here') renders individual violence invisible. Perhaps one could say that this reveals one side of nationalist violence (although more accurately it is concealed rather than revealed), this being the inward facing side that unites the

nation. The other side of that same violence manifests itself in the following phase, when this self-confident unity is broken.

The disruption of this communal harmony comes from outside, from the plurality of communities that emerge in such circumstances. In this second phase—the conflict situation—violence is aimed at those other communities, initially taking more or less the same form as the outwardly focused violence that previously targeted nature. At first glance the differences are negligible. Similar to the resistance offered by nature, the other community now manifests itself as a body of resistance against the social order of the own community with a contrasting identification of sense. The difference between the two situations is revealed in the reaction to violent attempts to break that resistance. While nature essentially remains passive and allows itself to be overwhelmed, the other community fights back, causing the violence to become increasingly blatant in conflicts between subjugators and subdued, and between oppressors and oppressed, taking on many different forms including revolution, emancipation and changing coalitions. This violence is expressed in the language of command and obedience. The violence described here takes place not just between nations but primarily between groups or classes within a nation, according to Eric Weil. In effect, in this phase the transition is made from the closed community of the first phase to a broader society. Society is therefore characterised by a dual battle: the external battle against nature and the internal battle between the classes. At the same time this clarifies the entanglement between these two forms of violence. The oppressors leave the battle against nature to be fought by the oppressed, while enjoying the fruits of this labour themselves.

This violence, whether in the form of a class war or a war between nations, is, as it were, eliminated in what could be referred to as the third phase, in which the violence of battles between people or groups is perceived to be counter-productive and needs to be eradicated through organisation: *'Les loups s'organisent donc entre eux'* (Weil, 1967, p. 81). In an organised society everyone is moulded into a useful cog in a comprehensive machine, which means on the one hand that everyone is valuable but on the other hand that everyone is objectified and commodified, thereby losing their individual identity. Eric Weil gives a shockingly recognisable depiction of the language in which what could be referred to as the structural violence of this organised world is expressed: serious language, the language of rational discussion, in which everything is objectified in order to enable compromise and objective agreement. It is the language of science, in which the scientist—the individual—is lost, and this is particularly evident in the field of human science. Individuals becomes objects that can be understood in terms of general, objective laws and no longer need to understand themselves. It leaves a particularly unpleasant aftertaste when Weil describes how this language initially accommodates the old language or languages, only to gradually replace them. People will gradually learn how to refer to themselves and their world in scientific terms: *'A la fin, tous parleront le langage de la rationalité et du calcul'* (p. 82). Until then old words such as justice, eminence, dignity, freedom and equality will be tolerated in the realisation that they have been liberated from their original, natural and social conditions. They may possibly have been sublimated, but Weil

seems to suggest that they have also been severed from their original meaning, becoming void of meaning and nihilistic.

In the fourth phase, the greater the success of this language and this social organisation, the greater the failure. The more it succeeds in conquering the problems of nature and of the other, the more it leaves a world in which mankind itself becomes superfluous. The universalisation of rationality and calculation creates a situation of constant tedium from which it is only possible to escape through irrational violence, whereby the individual is defined in terms of opposition to others, in an affirmation of self through the negation of the other. This seems to be a form of senseless violence, of resistance to the language of rationality, which has become a lie in the extent to which it ignores sense.

What is exceptional about this development, or this way of describing the development, is that it is not only and not so much the violence itself that emerges as a constant danger, but rather the threat of suppression of violence. Not only do we see the continual elimination of violence, we also see how dangerous this is since it suppresses not just violence but also the desire to make sense of it. Violence is not comprehended or made comprehensible, is not made sense of (*'élevé ... au sens'*), but is denied and concealed. As stated earlier, Weil goes further than Ricoeur in examining how the opposition between language and violence also implies a connection: *'Seul l'être violent, s'il parle, peut chercher un sens'* (p. 85). Violence and sense are on opposing sides but are inseparable.

What does this all mean in practice? What should we do about violence? Weil does not advocate a return to nature, even if this were possible. On the contrary, mastering the savage violence of nature is historically one of mankind's greatest achievements. What we need to avoid is a situation in which we lose sight of the question of sense while learning to control the violence of senselessness. For this we need to acknowledge the relationship between violence and language. According to Weil, we will have to learn to perceive ourselves as a unit that incorporates both violence and language, a unit that has learned to distinguish between these two phenomena over the course of our development but cannot untangle them definitively or vanquish the tension between them definitively. To indicate how this should be done he refers to the Hegelian trinity of art, religion and philosophy, in which he believes that man simultaneously expresses, denies and transcends both the violence of the absurd and the violence of his own passionate nature.

Although I am not entirely sure what Weil means by this, I suspect that it is an important point. Human culture cannot exist in a world in which violence is eliminated, but must exist in a world in which it is sublimated and simultaneously serves as a reminder. In common with the external violence of the natural world, which cannot be completely eliminated since we have to stay alert to the possibility of floods, hurricanes and volcanic eruptions, the internal violence within mankind cannot be completely eliminated either. We will have to learn to live with the violence of disease and death since this cannot be banished even by perfecting our grasp of medical science; we will be unable to fully tame the violence of our desires without becoming a slave to our domestication; and we will be unable to fully eradicate the violence of senselessness using our designs of sense without becoming blind to the

fragility of those designs. We will have to learn that violence is not outside of us or opposite us but rather that it comprises half of our being. It is not a question of replacing violence with language but of establishing an appropriate balance between the two. The problem of violence is therefore a question of degree.

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