WHAT VIOLENCE IS

Most people deplore violence, some people embrace violence (perhaps reluctantly), and a few people renounce violence. But through all these postures there runs a certain obscurity: it is never entirely clear just what violence is. Those who deplore violence loudest and most publicly are usually pillars of the status quo--school principals, businessmen, politicians, ministers. What they inveigh against most often is overt attack on property or against the "good order of society." They rarely see violence in defense of the status quo in the same light as violence directed against it. At the time of the Watts riots in 1965 Mr. Johnson urged Negroes to realize that nothing of value can be won through violent means -- a proposition which may be true but which, the President did not apply to the military escalation in Vietnam he was just then embarked upon, and which it would never have occurred to him to apply to the actions of the Los Angeles Police Department during the riots in the Watts district. Since the President is not the only leader who deplores violence while at the same time perpetrating it, a little more clarity about what exactly we deplore might help all around.

Violence often involves physical force, and the association of force with violence is very close: in many contexts the words become synonyms. An obvious instance is the reference to a violent storm, a storm of great force. But in human affairs violence and force, cannot be equated. Force without violence is often used on a person's body. If a person is in the throes of drowning, the standard Red Cross life-saving techniques specify force which is certainly not violence. To equate an act of rescue with an act of violence would be to lose sight entirely of the significance of the concept. Similarly, surgeons and dentists use force without doing violence.

Violence in human affairs is much more closely connected with the idea of violation than with the idea of force. What is fundamental about violence is that a person is violated. And if one immediately senses the truth of that statement, it must be because a person has certain rights which are undeniably, indissolubly, connected with being a person. One of these is a right to one's body, to determine what one's body does and what is done to one's body -- inalienable because without one's body one would cease to be a person. Apart from a body, what is essential to one's being a person is dignity. The real dignity of a person does not consist in remaining "dignified", but rather in the ability to make decisions. In this respect what is fundamental about a person is radically different from what is fundamental about a dog. The way I treat my dog, which seems to be a good way to treat a dog, is to train him to respond in a more or less mechanical way to certain commands. However, to treat human beings in that way is an affront to their dignity, because autonomy is essential to being human.

The right to one's body and the right to autonomy are undoubtedly the most fundamental natural rights of persons. A subsidiary one stems from the right to autonomy. It is characteristic of human action to be purposive and to have results and consequences. Freedom therefore is rightly conceived as involving not only the right to decide what to do but also the right to dispose of or cope with the consequences of one's action. One aspect of this is the right to the product of one's labor, which has played an important role in the theory of both capitalism and communism. If this line of thought is extended to the point of considering one's property an extension of a person, the scope of the concept of violence becomes greatly enlarged -- perhaps in harmony with popular thought on the subject, at least on the part of propertied persons. (However, one
should always bear in mind that even propertied persons can reconcile themselves much more readily to loss of possessions than to loss of life.) The right to cope with one's own problems and to face the consequences of one's acts (which I do not accord my dog) is typically abrogated by paternalism.

So violence in human affairs amounts to violating persons. It occurs in several markedly different forms, and can usefully be classified into four different kinds based on two criteria, whether the violence is personal or institutionalized, and whether the violence is overt or covert and quiet.

Overt physical assault of one person on the body of another is the most obvious form of violence. Mugging, rape and murder are the flagrant "crimes of violence," and when people speak of violence in the streets it is usually those acts that cross their minds. I share the general concern over the rising rate of these crimes, but deplore the tendency to limit the image of violence to just these three sorts of assault. These are cases where an attack on a human body is also both clearly an attack on a person and clearly illegal. But here we must not tie these characteristics in too tight a package, for some acts of violence are intended as a defense of law and order or as a benefit to the person whose body is beaten -- e.g., ordinary police activity (not "police brutality") and the corporal punishment of children by parents and teachers. The fact that police, parents, and teachers invoke socially defined roles when they resort to violence indicates that these cases have institutional aspects that overshadow the purely personal ones; but that fact cannot erase the violence done. Of course not all cases are so clear. (I leave to the reader to ponder just how, in sex acts, we distinguish on practical grounds between those that are violent and those that are not.) But whenever you employ force on another person's body without that person's consent, you are attacking not just a physical entity but a person -- and that is personal overt violence.

In war, what one army tries to inflict on another is what happens to individuals in cases of mugging and murder. The soldiers are responsible for acts of violence against "the enemy," at least in the logical sense that the violence would not have occurred if the soldiers had refused to act. The Nuremberg trials attempted to establish that some individual soldiers are responsible morally and legally too, but this overlooks the extent to which the institutionalization of violence makes its moral dimension ambiguous. On the one hand, an individual soldier is not acting on his own initiative and responsibility; on the other, a group does not have a soul and cannot act except through the agency of individual men. Thus there is a real difficulty in assigning responsibility for such institutional violence. The other side of the violence, its object, is equally ambiguous: "the enemy" is being attacked as an organized political force, and yet the bodies of individual men (and women and children) receive the blows. Warfare, therefore, because it is an institutionalized form of violence, differs from murder in certain fundamental respects.

Riots are another form of institutionalized violence, although their warlike character was not widely recognized until the publication of the report of the President's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. Some persons maintain that a riot is basically a massive crime wave, but it also can take on a warlike character. One of the characteristics of the Watts riot, as readers of Robert Conot's *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness* know, was that the people who were supposed to be controlling the situation, the Los Angeles police and their various
reinforcements, simply did not possess basic facts about the community. In particular, they did not know what persons could exercise a sort of leadership if the group were left alone.

So the Los Angeles police force and its various allies conducted what amounted to a war campaign. They acted like an army that seizes foreign territory, and their actions had the effect of breaking down whatever social structure there might have been -- which in turn had the effect of releasing more overt violence. The military flavor of urban disturbances has increased over the years, and in 1967 the authorities of Newark and Detroit employed not only machine guns and automatic rifles but also tanks and armored personnel carriers, in what the Kerner Commission characterized as "indiscriminate and excessive use of force." For that reason the urban disorders of recent summers are quite different from criminal situations in which police act against individual miscreants.

The overt forms of violence are, on the whole, easier to recognize than quiet or covert violence, which does not necessarily involve direct physical assault on anybody's person or property. There are both personal and institutional forms of quiet violence. Consider first a case of what we might call psychological violence, involving individuals. The following item appeared in The New York Times in 1968:

PHOENIX, Ariz., Feb. 6 (AP) -- Linda Marie Ault killed herself, policemen said today, rather than make her dog Beauty pay for her night with a married man.

The police quoted her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Ault, as giving this account:

Linda failed to return home from a dance in Tempe Friday night. On Saturday she admitted she had spent the night with an Air Force lieutenant. The Aults decided on a punishment that would "wake Linda up." They ordered her to shoot the dog she had owned about two years.

On Sunday, the Aults and Linda took the dog into the desert near their home. They had the girl dig a shallow grave. Then Mrs. Ault grasped the dog between her hands, and Mr. Ault gave his daughter a .22-caliber pistol and told her to shoot the dog.

Instead, the girl put the pistol to her right temple and shot herself.

The police said there were no charges that could be filed against the parents except possibly cruelty to animals.

The reason there can be no charges is that the parents did no physical damage to Linda. But that they did terrible violence to the girl the father himself recognized when he said to a detective, "I killed her; I killed her. It's just like I killed her myself." If we fail to recognize that a real psychological violence can be perpetrated on people, a violation of their autonomy, their dignity, their right to determine things for themselves, to be humans rather than dogs, then we fail to realize the full dimension of what it is to do violence.

One of the obvious transition cases between overt personal violence and quiet personal violence is the threat. Person who do something under threat of being shot are degraded by
losing their autonomy. We recognize that in law and morals: if a person so threatened takes money out of a safe and hands it to a robber, we say that the person acted under compulsion, and the responsibility for what is done lies only with the armed robber.

Of course, persons coerced with the threat of injury or death needn't surrender their autonomy; they could just refuse to hand over the loot. There can be a great deal of dignity in such a refusal, and one of the messages of Jean-Paul Sartre's moral philosophy is that whenever one acts other than with full responsibility for one's own actions, one is acting in "bad faith". That very demanding philosophy puts great emphasis upon autonomy and dignity, and is not to be lightly dismissed. Nevertheless one cannot expect that people will act with such uncompromising strength and dignity. To recognize that they can be broken down by threats and other psychological pressures as well as by physical attack, and that to have acted under threat or duress is as good an excuse before the law as physical restraint, establishes for the community the concept of psychological violence.

An insidious form of psychological violence is what might be called the "Freudian rebuff." It works like this. Suppose a young man makes a comment on the war or on civil rights or on some other current topic. The person he is talking to then says: "Well, you're just saying that because of your relations with your father." The young man naturally objects: "Of course I had a father, but look at the facts." And he starts bringing out the journals and newspapers and presents facts and statistics from them. Another rejoinder: "You must have a terrible Oedipus complex; you're getting so excited about this." And the young man then says: "Look, I've had some fights with my father, but I've read the paper and I have an independent interest in the civil rights question. It has nothing to do with my father." To which the response is, "Well, your denial just proves how deep your Oedipus complex is."

This type of Freudian rebuff has the effect of what John Henry Newman called "poisoning the wells." It gives its victims no ground to stand on. If they try to advance facts and statistics, they are discounted and their involvement is attributed to Freudian factors. If they attempt to prove themselves free of the aberration in question, their very protest is used as evidence against them. To structure a situation against persons in such a manner does violence to them by depriving them of their dignity: no matter what they do there is no way at all, so long as they accept the problem in the terms in which it is presented, for them to make a response that will allow them to emerge with honor.

Although this sort of cocktail-party Freudianism is not very serious in casual conversations, there are many forms of this ploy where the whole life and character of a person may be involved. A classic literary and religious version is the dispute between Charles Kingsley and John Henry Newman in the 19th century, in which Kingsley challenged Newman's integrity and ended up losing his stature as a Protestant spokesman. A full account of the dispute is written up in fascinating detail in many editions of Newman's Apologia. A political variation is the Marxian rebuff where, of course, it is because of your class standing that you have such and such a view, and if you deny that your class standing is influencing you in that way, your very denial shows how deeply you are imbued with the obfuscating ideology. Between parent and child, as between husband and wife, there are variations which turn upon the identification (by one insistent party) of love with some particular action, so that the other party must either surrender...
his autonomy or acknowledge his faithlessness.

This sort of psychological violence is most damaging when the person structuring the situation is in some position of special authority, e.g., in schools. An imaginative child does something out of the ordinary, and the teacher’s response is that the child is a discipline problem. It is now nearly impossible for the child to escape being a problem. Trying to do something creative will be stepping out of line again, thereby “confirming” being a problem. Staying in line is apt to lead to scholastic problems, thereby “confirming” lack of potential for anything but mischief. The result is a kind of stunted person typical of schools operating in large urban areas.

This last variation of the psychological rebuff leads to the fourth general category of violence, institutionalized quiet violence. The schools are an institution, and teachers are hired not so much to act on their own as to fulfill a predetermined classroom role. Violence done by the teacher may therefore not be personal but institutional: perpetrated while acting as a faithful agent of the educational system.

The idea of such institutional violence is very important. A clearer example may be a well-established system of slavery or colonial oppression, or the life in contemporary American ghettos. Once established, such a system may require relatively little overt violence to maintain it. It is legendary that Southerners used to boast, ”We understand our nigras; they are happy here and wouldn't want any other kind of life” -- and there is no reason to doubt that many a Southerner, raised in the system and sheltered from the recurrent lynchings, believed it. In that setup it is possible for an institution to go along placidly, with no overt disturbances, and yet to be terribly brutal.

There is more violence in the black ghettos than anywhere else in America -- even when the ghettos are quiet. At the time of the Harlem riots in 1964 the Negro psychologist Kenneth Clark said that there was more day-to-day violence in the life of the ghettos than there was in any day of those disturbances. I'm not sure exactly what he meant. There is a good deal of overt personal violence in the black ghettos, for reasons Frantz Fanon has explained in The Wretched of the Earth. But we must also recognize the quiet violence in the very operation of the system. Bernard Lafayette of SCLC speaks angrily of the violence of the status quo: "The real issue is that part of the 'good order of society' is the routine oppression and racism committed against millions of Americans every day. That is where the real violence is.” A black ghetto in most American cities operates very like any system of slavery. Relatively little overt violence is needed to keep the institution going, and yet the institution violates the human beings involved because they are systematically denied the options which are open to the vast majority in the society. A systematic denial of options is one way to deprive people of autonomy.

Perhaps denying options would not do violence to people if individual persons were islands unto themselves and individuality were the full truth about human life. But it is not. We are social beings; our whole sense of what we are is dependent on the fact that we live in society, and have open to us socially determined options. What access we have to the socially defined options is much more important than what language or what system of property rights we inherit at birth. The institutional form of quiet violence operates when people are deprived of choices in a systematic way by the very manner in which transactions normally take place. It is as real, and as wicked, as the thief with a knife.
NOTES

1. Riots broke out in New York in 1964 when an off-duty police officer shot and killed a black youth. More riots erupted in other cities during that summer. In 1965 a more serious riot broke out in the Watts district of Los Angeles. Rioting continued through 1966 and 1967, the worst occurring in Detroit in 1967. On the final day of the Detroit riot, President Lyndon Johnson appointed this special commission, widely known as the Kerner Commission, to investigate the civil disorders. In its report, delivered in 1968, the Commission identified institutional racism as an underlying cause of the rioting.


3. In his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (various editions), discussed in the following paragraph.

4. Now a distinguished educator, with degrees from Harvard. Much of his work has been teaching alternatives to violence.

5. This essay was originally published in *The Nation* of June 24, 1968, and has been reprinted numerous times, most recently (with minor modifications) in Vittorio Bufacchi, *VIOLENCE: A Philosophical Anthology*, New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.