

Violence as a philosophical theme

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It is reasonable to say that violence has an enduring presence within the fabric of our human world. Its space of occurrence ranges from the most daily expressions to those exceptional cases which are specific to the phenomenon of war. This being the case, it is also reasonable to say that violence shapes in some more or less drastic manner the world we live in. We accept this statement as the expression of a trivial fact and it just might be the case that our plain acceptance prevents us from placing its significance into question. In his latest book, *Violence and Phenomenology*, James Dodd tries to pin down precisely the bearing that violence has on the way we are and, consequently, on the world we occupy.

As long as war normalizes, in some respect, the violence which is always its central trait, the author considers that there is a real possibility to become its *dupes*, an outcome which would be brought about given that we would take it for granted. Dodd states that this happens because we either expect *too much* from violence or *too little*. The first case holds as long as we “look to violence either to express a decisiveness of purpose or to provide a proof of authenticity that violence cannot in fact sustain” (p. 1). Have in mind here, for example, those governments that are trying to overcome their weaknesses by an excessive use of violence. The second case is effective whenever we “believe that violence will simply wither away, due either to the weight of our moral vigilance or the effectiveness of the political, legal, social, or ethical instruments

that we employ in the hope of avoiding the destruction of war. (p. 1).

In connection with this distinction, Dodd's purpose becomes clear, a purpose which is therapeutic in nature, as long as he tries to *cure* us from our naïve grip on violence. The path that would fulfill this purpose is that of a philosophical treatment of violence. But this is no easy task, as long as it is not even clear that violence is a philosophical object proper. There is an important reason for this, namely the existence of other disciplines which claim violence as their lawful object. Here, the author mentions military science, international politics, or law which tend to develop a "technical" approach on their object. It follows that philosophy is entitled to move toward violence only if it is capable of bringing it in its purview in a nontechnical manner.

To make Dodd's intentions a little more clear, it is necessary to mention that he considers that the discourses on violence are possible within the confines of two extremes: the former is settled by the so called "stupidity of violence principle", the latter being the one which takes violence to be a *constitutive event*. The mentioned principle reveals violence as a mere *means*, which is to say that it "is thus blind; when taken for itself it is ultimately without direction" (p. 11). From this point of view violence in and for itself cannot be the proper ground for anything *lasting*. Its stupidity comes into view, for example, when, being pursued in an excessive manner, undermines the very aim which was set to achieve. Now, to take violence as a *constitutive event* is to reflect on its *sense*, an attitude that assumes that it just might be more than a mere means. It is in connection to this that phenomenology comes into play, for, as Dodd states, "at the heart of phenomenological philosophy is the conviction that all genuine philosophical problems are problems of sense, or meaning" (p. 15), or, differently put, to treat violence phenomenologically means to see how its sense is articulated in lived experience. However, phenomenology functions here only as a method of description, this being motivated by the fact that violence is a specific type of objectivity, which "becomes an acute problem for a

philosophy that seeks to realize itself in the form of a reflection on a subjectivity that articulates the sense of things” (p. 149).

In conformity with what has been laid down above, James Dodd’s study aims at a better conception of violence, a task which would be brought about if it were revealed as a philosophical object proper, which in its turn would amount to its recognition not as a mere *means*, but also as a *constitutive sense*. Having in mind that in his book, the author employs a very complex argumentation, I will limit myself in what follows to a brief presentation of what precisely signifies to conceive violence as the origin of a meaning. This aspect is developed in its most comprehensive version in a discussion of Patočka’s *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*. This discussion is in fact the culmination of a long argument that commences from Sartre’s connection between the concept of violence and nihilism, continues with detailed presentations of Jünger’s, Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s conceptions of nihilism, to arrive in the end at Patočka’s *Essays*.

Sartre’s linkage between the concept of violence from the *Notebooks for an Ethics* with nihilism holds due to a specific conception of violence: its configuration entails two moments, namely one that amounts to a certain type of *weakness* – Sartre speaks here of a certain type of weakness because he regards violence as representing the refusal to conform to those laws that govern any form of action, a conception that draws its sense from the fact that the French author considers power to be precisely the ability to conform to those very laws – and, as a result of this aspect, we come up against the moment of *affirmation* – which represents the affirmation of the inessentiality of things, or, in other words, the inessentialness of everything that exists in relation to me and my goal. To conceive violence in this dualistic manner is equivalent to “the problem of nihilism: the problem of affirmation of the nothingness of things” (p. 77). At this point, Dodd’s argumentation turns to Jünger’s essay *Über die Linie*, in order to develop a more sophisticated perspective on nihilism. The line that is indicated in the title of this essay stands for the completion of European nihilism, a moment which, paradoxically, would “represent the inauguration of a new,

transformed life” (p. 79). But how is it possible for the closure of nihilism to inspire a certain type of optimism, one that would be the driving force behind our attempt to surmount the line? Jünger clarifies this aspect by opposing optimism to what he calls *defeatism*, the latter being “a kind of panic in the face of fear, whether fear for what is ownmost and inward to the self, or, for what belongs outside of the sphere of the inward” (p. 80). Now, the experimentation of this fear brings nihilism to the fore in a specific manner, because it puts us in the situation of being aware of the fact that we have no resources to act against that which threatens us. In other words, we become conscious of our helplessness. From this point of view, nihilism, as the emergence of collapse, not only makes us the objects of this collapse, but, in doing so, thanks to the defeatist experimentation of fear, makes itself visible. If this holds, then some kind of diagnosis of nihilism would be possible, which in turn would put forward “a demand for its transformation” (p. 82).

Heidegger’s main concern with Jünger’s position, a concern expressed in a letter, one that was published with the title *Zur Seinsfrage*, is the way in which Jünger employs the metaphor of the line, because for him, the moment through which it is surpassed is not as important as the moment of its closure in itself. In other words, Heidegger is concerned with the essence of nihilism, with the how of its appearance. As long as nihilism is already an answer to the question of essence in general, one that points to things as being precisely nothing, then to put its essence into question is to ask “what it means in nihilism to answer nothing to the question of what it means to be” (p. 97). Heidegger’s aim here is to take seriously the nothingness of nihilism, an endeavor which Jünger simply failed to accomplish. Now, Jünger is not to blame for this failure, because his task was radically different: he tried to see if it is possible to surpass the line, which in turn implied the necessity of a diagnosis. To give a diagnosis in this case is to take up certain descriptions of what may be called, for example, the “moral situation of humanity”, a description designed to pin down those signs that set apart the devaluation – the Nietzschean trait is obvious here – which is specific to nihilism.

Not taking the nothingness of nihilism seriously is equivalent to this very descriptive task, because, on the one hand, it was necessary for nihilism to come to fulfillment so as to undertake it and, on the other hand, if it is fulfilled, then all your descriptions will be marked by nihilistic optics, a fact that would put nihilism itself in a blind spot. This is what Dodd calls the “invisibility of nihilism”. In contrast to this, Heidegger’s serious attitude towards nihilism amounts to an inversion of Jünger’s schemata: instead of surpassing the line, it would be advisable to stay on the line, as Heidegger suggests, taking up the nothingness on its own terms, because “perhaps the nothing, the abandonment of being itself, holds in itself the potential for a gathering of possibility that passes beyond what has otherwise come to rest on the line” (p. 103).

At this point, Dodd contrasts Sartre’s viewpoint on violence, as the affirmation of the inessentiality of things, to the implication that Heidegger’s conception of nihilism has on violence. In a certain sense, Sartre’s scheme portrays violence as being constitutive. Heidegger’s idea of nihilism reserves no special place for violence, for to take nihilism seriously is to affirm that all there is “is” for nothing. In this context, violence can be conceived only as a *means*, which is to say an instrument for nothing.

This is the background of Dodd’s discussion about Patočka’s conception of violence. It is worth mentioning that in *Heretical Essays*, the matter of the line is also present. But Patočka’s concern with this metaphor does not end up with a conception of it as a culmination and passage (Jünger), or as the origin of the meaning of being (Heidegger). The line which is at the centre of Patočka’s attention is the front line specific to any war, in this case being a metaphor which expresses the distance between those that *stay* and those that *go* to war, thus sacrificing their lives for peace. The possibility of sacrifice marks somehow the fact that, as long as life can sacrifice itself, there is something that transcends it, a fact that indicates an alternative to a life lived only for itself. The violence which is specific to the front line and which is experienced by those that stay *in line* makes possible “not a loss of the self, but a peak of the self” (p. 129). Again, this peak secures for those that are

willing – for Patočka to die on the front line is an act of absolute freedom – to sacrifice their lives, an existence that breaks the meaningless cycle of a life pursued only for itself. Life at the peak is the source of what Patočka calls the “solidarity of the shaken”, which in turn makes possible for the insight gained by those *on the line* “to reach far beyond the confines of an individual’s experience” (p. 131). Therefore, violence can become constitutive, providing that the intersubjective insight could be the source of a world that overcame the inauthenticity of the profane.

Thus ends my brief presentation of Dodd’s argument. In the end of this review, it must be stated that *Violence and Phenomenology* is not a mere collection of conceptions of violence. As seen, for example, the argument just presented is marked essentially by a guiding line: the idea that violence must be either a means or a constitutive event functions as a hermeneutical principle, one that allows Dodd to get a specific perspective on the texts discussed.

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