Fred’s Ontology of Violence and its Political Implications

Timothy Appleton (Universidad Camilo José Cela, Spain)

Can one find a consistent political position in Freud? Yes, in fact, there are four, which I designate as Conservative, Liberal-Democratic, Radical Democratic and “Communist”. Each one represents a different way of relating to what I call Freud’s fundamental ontology of the drives, specifically, the death drive. Since Freud himself interprets the social effects of the death drive in terms of violence, we can also call this an ontology of violence. The social order then emerges as an attempt to limit this violence. This analysis, when applied to political questions, might situate Freud as a conservative in the Hobbesian mode, and he has certainly often been interpreted in this way. However, I will argue that in order to interpret Freud in this way (and only this way), it is also necessary to add another factor to the analysis. It must be shown that Freud identifies with his own analysis. This means that he believes that it is both good and necessary that society be structured in this way i.e., as an attempt to limit a fundamental violence. This, however, opens the possibility of three other positions in Freud, namely that which sees the social limitation of violence as good but contingent, that which sees the social limitation of violence as bad but contingent and, finally, that which sees the social limitation of violence as bad but necessary. If the first of these four positions is the conservative one, the second is liberal-democratic, the third is radical-democratic and the fourth is communist. All of these positions——either in a fully fleshed-out or a fragmentary way——can be found in Freud. The only final thing to add is that the last position—the communist one—is that which owes most the Freudoan revolution in thought.

The Original Polemos. Phenomenology and violence in Jacques Derrida

Valeria Campos Salvaterra (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Chile)

I will present some key points on Jacques Derrida’s treatment of the question of violence in direct relation with Phenomenology, especially with the work of E. Husserl, and secondarily with those of M. Heidegger and E. Levinas. I will approach violence associated to deconstruction as a condition of possibility of meaning, tracing the genesis and structure of formulations such as ‘original violence,’ ‘transcendental violence’ and ‘archi-violence,’ present in the first works of Derrida (1954-1967). My theoretical approach is that these formulations are configured in specific relations of inheritance present in Derrida’s early texts, especially with Husserl’s phenomenology (Le problème de la genèse dans la phenomenology de Husserl; Introduction a ‘L’origine de la géometrie’ de Husserl; Le voix et le phénomène) and the ethical theory held by Levinas (Violence et métaphysique). Nevertheless, I will present one more scene of genesis that takes place in De la grammatologie with a certain Heidegger, author of Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics. This triple source is for Derrida the ground to unfold a strong deconstructive reading of the problem of violence in phenomenological tradition, and to articulate his own proposal of an irresistible tension with otherness found there where western philosophy tends to see just a pure, simple origin. This path will be followed through the treatment of the notion of self-affectation, a latter formulated concept first found in the quoted discussion with Heidegger, but with a background that is already present in the debate about temporal synthesis and iteraibility held with Husserl and in that about otherness and substitution held with Levinas. I will show that this notion of ‘original violence’ is a main concept for deconstruction through all Derrida’s textual epochs, allowing the proposal of an “economy of violence” and later configurations of the problem related to his political thought.

The Divine Violence of Learning: Walter Benjamin and the Redemptive Potential of Education

Benjamin Chwistek (University of York, England)

‘The divine power is attested not only by religious tradition but is also found in present-day life in at least one sanctioned manifestation. The educative power [Gewalt], which in its perfected form stands outside the law, is one of its manifestations.’ (Benjamin, ‘Critique of Violence’) Walter Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’ has seen sustained and detailed analysis by a diverse range of scholars. The purpose of this paper will be to present a previously un-noted element of Benjamin’s text: namely, the redemptive power of education. In this paper I will offer an explication and examination of Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’. I will begin by laying out its historical context, and will argue that Benjamin’s text is aimed at critiquing neo-Kantian models of an individual’s capacity to act, which see the state and the legal system as limits to individual action. Thus, a central concern of Benjamin’s text is how to break open this cycle of (what he terms) mythical violence, which is the hallmark of law and means/end rationality. I will then note a generally unacknowledged piece of the text:

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specifically, that Benjamin makes a brief mention of the divine violence of education. Education fits with Benjamin’s account of divine violence: it stands outside of mythical law (insofar as it is not law-preserving or law-making); it is not (necessarily) connected to means/end rationality; and it has the power to break laws insofar as laws are that which sets the boundaries of rational action. That is not to say, in itself, education is a means to break some or other law, but rather to fundamentally break the means/end proscription of the current legal framework. Education provides the ability to see beyond the current legal system and to appreciate its inherent violence, and in so doing is thus law-breaking on Benjamin’s account. Through this account of the divine violence of education, an unacknowledged piece of Benjamin’s text and thinking will be enunciated. Moreover, it will provide a contribution to a fuller understanding of the nature of Benjamin’s thinking on mythic and divine violence (as critique of means/end rationality).

Violence, divine or otherwise: Myth, Violence, and History in the Schmitt-Benjamin debate
Hjalmar Falk

The aim of this paper is to chart the terms, contexts, and implications of the confrontation between Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt. It is well known that Benjamin referred to Schmitt in his book on baroque mourning plays, even providing Schmitt with a copy, and that Schmitt ‘answered’ in his book on Hamlet 30 years later, but the further implications of their interaction is contested. Central to this exchange were questions regarding sovereignty, violence, myth, history, and the emergence of modern secular politics. The ‘debate’ has long been a controversial topic and subject to speculation, but in a letter written late in his life, Schmitt claimed that his true answer to Benjamin was to be found in his 1938 book on Hobbes’s Leviathan, which constitutes a veritable treatise on political mythology. Thereby he gives credence to the idea of a more substantial relation between them, centred on the violent emergence of the modern state and its mythologies in the early modern era. In this paper, I start by examining the open references that Benjamin and Schmitt make to each other’s work. I then move on to discuss how these references resonate with greater frames regarding myth and history within their respective works, and this in turn with central intellectual and political contexts surrounding them. Through this reconstruction of a shared framework for the confrontation between Schmitt and Benjamin, I bring their thoughts on the mythic, violence, and history into constellation with our own times to contemplate the potentially violent end to a nominally post-historical era. According to Schmitt and Benjamin, violent events give rise to myth, which in its turn induces meaning into history. How do our tumultuous times look, when viewed in light of the Schmitt-Benjamin debate?

The Violence of Meaning and the Limits of Judgment
Antonio Gómez Ramos

Hannah Arendt’s essay On Violence sketches a politics as an end in itself, where the instrumentality of violence can be conceived as something pre-political, alien to the real process of politics and power. On the other hand, Walter Benjamin’s enigmatic, early essay Zur Kritik der Gewalt proposes a politics of pure means based on a “pure, divine violence” different from the usual violence that imposes or changes the law. In a previous article, I have explored how Arendt’s notion of politics as an end in itself and Benjamin’s politics of pure means can correspond mutually only if we are able to understand Judgment (precisely Kantian reflective judgment) as a capacity of not deciding, as a restraint from decision, from interpretation and compulsive action. In this paper, I aim to continue this exploration in the light of Judith Butler’s reflections on the violence of interpretation, the opacity of the other and the primacy of the second person – especially in her work Giving an account of oneself. How is it possible to refer to the other and to establish a social bond without forcing a meaning into her subjectivity (as a friend, as an enemy, as a member of some determinate group), and how does this violent attribution of meaning relate to the violence that seems to be inherent to politics, also to a politics of freedom? Through a critical reading of Butler, my contention will be that the resolution of this triangle of violence, meaning and judgment can be the ground for a politics of freedom that is both attentive to the autonomy of individuals and to their vulnerability.

Surviving Violence: Three Moments in the Constitution of the Lacanian Subject
Emma Ingala

Lacan never systematised a theory of violence. Nevertheless, his work could be understood as a continuous effort to think and confront the issue of violence. In particular, my hypothesis is that Lacan detects at least three different types of violence in the constitution (and destitution) of the subject, and that he devotes himself, clinically and theoretically, to studying the possible responses to them. The first type of violence is the aggressiveness that results from the narcissistic formation of the ego, that is, from the imaginary dimension of subjectivity. The second type of violence is the one imposed by language and, in general, the symbolic order with its laws and norms. Finally, the real would be a third kind of violence, a violence that disrupts reality or the world structured by imaginary and symbolic constructions. From this, violence would seem to be not only inevitable but also structural, in so far as it appears to be a necessary condition for the emergence of the subject. However, Lacan understands that subjectivity is also a constant negotiation of and resistance to these forms of violence. In the last part of my paper, I would like to examine the particular normative and ethical stance that Lacan adopts in order to engage with the three problems of violence that his theory presents us with.

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Violence and Civilization: Gramsci, Machiavelli and Sorel
Robert Jackson (Manchester Metropolitan University, England)

The writings of Antonio Gramsci represent a rich repository for re-thinking violence in relation to the political and the ethical. Despite a tendency in some quarters to reduce Gramsci’s concept of hegemony to a theory of consent, his Prison Notebooks exhibit a deep concern with the ‘armour of coercion’. Thus in his reflections on Machiavelli’s Centaur, Gramsci regards this figure as symbolic of a ‘dual perspective’, half-animal half-human. For Gramsci, political thought should seek to elaborate the dialectical unity of these two levels: force and consent. I will consider the formation of this nexus of violence and civilisation in Gramsci’s writings through his encounter with two thinkers, Machiavelli and Georges Sorel. Gramsci takes up Machiavelli’s use of militaristic terminology and the Florentine’s emphasis on the military basis of political struggles, expressed in the semantic field of concepts such as ‘war of manoeuvre’ and ‘war of position’. However, Gramsci balances this tendency with a recognition of the relationship between arms and religion, in Benedetto Croce’s ethico-political terms, between the universal (state) and the individual (church). Gramsci also draws vitality for his re-articulation of a historical materialist framework from a second source, the Reflections on Violence (1906) by Sorel. I will explore Gramsci’s engagement with and criticism of the fusion of Marx and Bergson found in Sorel’s work, including the notions of ‘clan vital’, the ‘historic bloc’, and ‘political myth’. Examining the Gramscian distinction between myth (a ‘body of images capable of evoking sentiments’) and utopia (a ‘deceptive mirage of the future’), I consider Gramsci’s argument that only the political myth is able to mobilise the strongest inclinations of a people, to create a violent force that can cleave the social fabric. I argue that Gramsci’s reflections on ‘cleavage’ and ‘consciousness’ in Sorel speak to contemporary ruptural conceptions of social transformation.

Understanding Suffering from Social Violence: Arendt’s and Adorno’s Legacy
Emanuel John (University of Potsdam, Germany)

In my talk I lay out the thesis that the meaning of social violence can only be understood properly, if we understand what it means to suffer from it. I develop this thesis by comparing and furthing Hannah Arendt’s and Theodor W. Adorno’s reflections on the Holocaust and 20th century totalitarianism. I begin with Arendt’s conception of the banality of evil. This leads to an understanding of the subject, who does not entertain thought about her social activities, as the source of social violence. It will be shown that Arendt’s approach leaves a blind spot for those who suffer within social structures, because she merely focuses on particular persons who commit evils and are thereby the source of violence. Secondly I discuss Adorno’s reflection on the relation between moral philosophy and society, referring to his lectures ‘Problems of Moral Philosophy,’ in order to fill out the blind spot Arendt leaves us with. As Adorno says that moral philosophy is only possible as resistance against social structures, which are sources of violence, his approach leads us to an understanding of suffering in terms of negation of freedom and reason. However, Adorno’s reflection only leads to an understanding of the negativity of freedom and reason in society, but cannot provide an understanding of the experience of suffering of a particular person. While Arendt’s approach merely focuses on the particular person as a source of violence, Adorno’s reflection seems too be to general for understanding suffering. I show in a third step that in order to overcome these shortcomings, we first have to further Adorno so that we can grasp the actual experience of suffering in particular social relations as consciousness of negativity of freedom and reason. We can then develop an understanding of the particular person, who suffers from violence, as a political subject that may address or stop the evil Arendt points out.

Solution and Redemption: Benjamin on the Temporalities of Violence
Mijael Jiménez (Kingston University, England)

Positing the question for the kinds or modalities of violence that have to be thought in order to understand the political problem of justice and its relation to the legal order, Benjamin introduces the difference between the ‘solution (Lösung) to human problems’ and ‘redemption (Erlösung),’ to affirm that neither of them are ‘conceivable’ ‘if violence is totally excluded in principle.’ Although this passage brings solution and redemption together, the distinction is further elaborated in other writings dedicated to divergent presentations of critical, political or revolutionary forms of experience that differentiate what is realisable in history and what remains out of history. Among these, the ‘Programme of the Coming Philosophy,’ the essay on mechanical reproducibility, and the theses known as ‘On the Concept of History,’ attempt to bring together what they present as historical tasks on the one hand and the redemptive character of historical experience on the other, which, however, can only be fragmentarily and momentarily actualised, perpetually deferring the possibility of redemption. Although these writings distinguish both spheres in terms of divergent temporalities, they collapse both realms in some moments of their respective arguments. This paper aims to explore, first, how this distinction operates in Benjamin’s essay on violence in order to think the efficacy of the notion of violence to sustain an account of the interruption of what is called ‘mythic violence,’ an interruption that is ultimately recast as ‘divine violence,’ and, paradoxically, regarded as a form of ‘non-violence’ in Benjamin’s conclusion. Second, drawing from those other writings we will argue that the interruption of the mythical order of violence has to be understood in terms of the interruption of the already interrupted actualisation of the potentialities of modernity, the presentation of which appears more clearly in the artwork essay.

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The Violent of ‘ought to’ towards being: Heidegger and the Normative Power of Facticity

Manuela Massa (Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany)

This contribution aims at describing the meaning of a very particular form of violence in Heidegger’s thought, namely the coercive type, in order to arrive at a clarification and critical treatment of its nature. It is the kind of violence the “ought to” exercises upon being and which allows Heidegger’s Dasein to obtain the normative power of factual life. Consequently, the present intervention will be developed along a four-point structure (a-d). First of all a) we will focus on what Heidegger considered to be the starting point of Metaphysics. In order to do so, we will describe how the Platonic interpretation of being as αἴτιο shaped the beginning of the ‘Occidental philosophy.’ The violence that platonic thought exercised upon being, led the thought to a loss of its proper meaning and to the understanding of αἴτησις as ὀρθότες. Therefore, for b), our attention will be directed to the coercive aspect of the violence in platonic thought as reflected in the obligation “ought to” puts on being in order to demonstrate how their separation—a key point in the metaphysical tradition—actually implied a more subtle distinction between being and thought, as also developed inside the Aristotelian tradition. The systematically of this limitation oblige us to analyze the implied predicates of good and bad and the possible ethical implications this might entail which will be our focus at c). Through this investigation it will become clear that Heidegger’s philosophy of values must be understood neither as nihilistic nor as naturalistic, but as strictly ontological. We will then redirect our attention on the facticity of human life and dignity in section d), in order not only to show how Heidegger tries to endow it with an ontological status through ethical formulations, but also how the eventfulness outlook ultimately leads to Heidegger’s formulation of a standpoint critical towards violence.

Adorno, Suffering and Epistemic Violence: Critique of Progress

Mariam Matar (New School for Social Research, USA)

Adorno’s account of progress differs radically from that of the philosophic tradition in that it seeks to make sense of history and progress in a manner that evades both the Kantian understanding of progress as a historical imperative and the Hegelian story of progress as a historically developmental fact. At the core of his imminent critique of industrial society is a question directed to what role social suffering plays in this narrative of historical progress. In other words, in what ways does the existence of suffering illuminate the internal failures of the form of life that is capitalism, for example? According to Gerhard Schweppenhauer, ‘a society is thus measured by the extent to which it honors its objective claim to belong to everyone and makes a good life possible for all individuals according to their abilities’ (17), where ‘good life’ delineates one free of suffering and violence. The purpose of this essay is to show the way in which Adorno’s imminent critique seeks to escape this notion of suffering and violence as a historical necessity. In order to accomplish this, I will explore the desideratum that Adorno highlights in the accounts of suffering in Hegel and Kant’s work. I also aim to make explicit various forms of suffering implicit in Adorno’s work, in order to show how his unique understanding of suffering makes for a critique of progress and method of critique that pushes the boundaries between the epistemic categories of the universal and the particular. In tangent to this reconstruction of Adorno’s account of suffering, I hope to delineate what epistemic violence is, how it results in particular moments of suffering, and what meaning can be derived from the experience of epistemic violence for history and social progress. Through this essay, I will demonstrate that Adorno’s imminent critique offers a radical non-foundationalist and subjectivist understanding of normativity that illuminates the moments of failure internal to specific social systems, outlines what a successful critique and overcoming of these failures looks like, and, in so doing, offers the most promising transformative understanding of history.

Sartre’s Later Work: Towards a notion of Institutional Violence

Marieke Mueller (Université Paris Nanterre, France)

Jean-Paul Sartre is famously associated with the question of violence through his essay on Fanon. The discussion of Sartre’s understanding of violence therefore often focuses on its (un)justifiability as a strategy against oppression. At the same time, Sartre’s writings on violence explore a multitude of aspects. From his Notebook for an Ethics, written in 1947-48, to the Critique of Dialectical Reason (1960) and his preface to The Wretched of the Earth (1961), Sartre’s texts investigate the violence of the oppressor, the problem of counter-violence, and, especially in the Critique, the relationship of violence contained in the intersubjective formation that is the ‘fused group’. From these works emerges a complex understanding that views violence as a relationship that is always-already contained in the situation, rather than simply as a behaviour that can be chosen or rejected at will. While the abovementioned works have received widespread attention from critics on this theme, Sartre’s last book, the monumental Flaubert biography The Family Idiot (1971-72) remains relatively unexplored. My paper proposes a discussion of the ethico-political dimension of this text, which delivers valuable insights into Sartre’s understanding of violence 10 years after the Critique. I will suggest firstly that Sartre’s thought moves towards a notion of institutional violence, and secondly that his analysis, previously centred on the violence contained in the colonial relationship, begins to take into account also the institution of power within European societies. My reading will focus in particular on a passage dedicated to the institution of the school system in the early 19th century. I will highlight the detailed account offered by Sartre of the violent component of a process by which a new, bourgeois, form of subjectivity is instituted through the functioning of the school system. I thus aim to demonstrate the original nature of the later Sartre’s approach to violence, its relevance for an understanding of contemporary society, and the proximity between Sartre’s view and Bourdieu’s notion of ‘symbolic violence’.

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The underlying argument developed here is that, for Agamben, violence is ontologically inscribed in his account of the political in the violent struggle. One of the most provocative of these explanations was provided by Cornelius Castoriadis, who suggested that the most clearly in psychoanalytical theory, that examines the way(s) in which individuality is created from and, to an extent, defined by Taming the Little Screaming Monster: Castoriadis on Violence and the Creation of the Individual Agamben’s philosophical project in terms of our understanding of the notion of violence and its relation to the political. underscore their relevance for the understanding of violence and political resistance. To do so, I will locate Agamben’s notion of the structure of this machine, I will critically examine the notions of ‘Destituent Power’ and the politics of inoperativity in order to political in the West, places the potential for political resistance outside the biopolitical machine. After presenting Agamben’s analysis of the breakdown in relations between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, and they were also the object of a virulent attack by Camus. Other contemporaries acted similarly. In the end, it was not only other philosophers and writers who were critical. Just as, in his later years, Merleau-Ponty would return to and reappraise the arguments of the Phenomenology of Perception, so he would reassess the arguments of Humanism and Terror, subsequently developing his position in a more nuanced fashion. But rather than invoking this self-criticism as a justification to dismiss the violence of Humanism and Terror as in any way philosophically valuable, as has been the case, we propose to re-evaluate the work’s position regarding violence, both within the author’s own philosophical development and in relation to the work of thinkers such as Sartre. Although the historical context has of course changed, with the events at the beginning of the Cold War that provide the basis for many of Humanism and Terror’s discussions now well behind us, it would be wholly naïve to think that the violence the work lays bare has no resonance in our contemporary world, or in contemporary philosophical debate. On the contrary, at a time when ideological confrontations are clearly growing again, and when acts of unspeakable barbarity are on the rise, it is of great importance to return to a work of philosophy that has dared to speak of violence in the frankest of terms.

Violence, Biopolitics and Resistance: The Meaning of Violence in the work of Giorgio Agamben German Primera (University of Brighton, England) What is the nature of the relation that, in the western political tradition, has forced together violence and the political? Can violence and the political be articulated through a modality that simultaneously juxtaposes them and takes them as two separate ontological realities? Is the epistemological distinction between violence and the Political justified? And if so, how does biopolitical theory sketch the points of contact between the two? This paper aims at examining the general coordinates of Agamben’s biopolitical theory and at studying both the ontological implications of this theory in terms of our understanding of violence and the politics of resistance that follows from it. The underlying argument developed here is that, for Agamben, violence is ontologically inscribed in his account of the political in the West. In this sense, Agamben’s political ontology does not allow for the construction of a project of resistance written in a biopolitical key. Indeed, unlike Negri’s account of affirmative biopolitics Agamben’s archaeology of the relation that forces together bios and the political in the West, places the potential for political resistance outside the biopolitical machine. After presenting Agamben’s analysis of the structure of this machine, I will critically examine the notions of ‘Destituent Power’ and the politics of inoperativity in order to underscore their relevance for the understanding of violence and political resistance. To do so, I will locate Agamben’s notion of ‘Destituent Power’ within a larger genealogy of the notion of violence and resistance that includes Walter Benjamin’s divine violence, Paul’s as-not, and Foucault’s philosophical archaeology. To conclude, I will reflect on the new elements that are brought about by Agamben’s philosophical project in terms of our understanding of the notion of violence and its relation to the political.

Taming the Little Screaming Monster: Castoriadis on Violence and the Creation of the Individual Gavin Rae (Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Spain) While violence has historically been reduced to an action that an agent perpetuates or suffers from, there is a strand of thought, manifested most clearly in psychoanalytical theory, that examines the way(s) in which individuality is created from and, to an extent, defined by violent struggle. One of the most provocative of these explanations was provided by Cornelius Castoriadis, who suggested that the conference forms part of the activities for the Conex Marie Sklodowska-Curie Research Project ‘Sovereignty and Law: Between Ethics and Politics’ co-funded by the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, the European Union’s Seventh Framework Program for Research, Technological Development and Demonstration under Grant Agreement 600371, The Spanish Ministry of the Economy and Competitiveness (COFUND 2013-40258), The Spanish Ministry for Education, Culture, and Sport (CEI-15-17), and Banco Santander. More information about the research project can be found at: https://sovereigntyandlaw.wordpress.com/ Support is also being provided by the Department of Theoretical Philosophy, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, where the conference forms part of the activities for the research project ‘Pensamiento y Representación Literaria y Artística Digital ante la Crisis de Europa y el Mediterráneo’ PR26/16-68-3.
individual is a consequence of the taming of the screaming monster that is the psychic monad; the initial, ontological core of human being. This core is the locus of radical creativity, but it is also inherently selfish and asocial, characteristics that put it at odds with others to the extent that its survival is at stake. To permit social relations and, hence, its survival, the psychic monad must be tamed by the institutions of society; it must, in other words, be conditioned by the social imaginary of that society to accept its rules and morality. This process is never willing entered into by the psychic monad, but must be imposed on it by society. The child must then be forcibly torn from the world of his psychic monad and incorporated into the social world; only this permits the socialized individual to arise. Importantly, this process entails sublimation not rupture: the socialized individual does not annihilate the psychic monad; the latter continues to exist ‘within’ the socialized individual. On the one hand, this means that the individual is always caught between ‘the screaming monster’ within and the norms of his society. But, on the other hand, it means that the screaming monster within, and not the individual, as much Enlightenment thought has insisted, that permits creativity. On Castoriadis’s telling, this means that political autonomy is located from the screaming monster within, who is always opposed to society and so can challenge its norms. Violence is then not only a necessary aspect of the process that creates individuality, but also inherent to the actions and world of the psychic monad; that is, what it is to be human.

From Structural to Ontological Violence: Violence as Restriction of Human Potentiality
Valentina Ricci (University of California, Irvine, USA)

What is violence? How many kinds of violence are there? Is there a common feature (or set of features) that all forms of violence share? If not, then what legitimizes the use of the same term in a variety of different cases? Philosophical debates about violence are often unclear about questions concerning the ontology of violence. In this paper I propose a taxonomy of the major accounts of violence and defend a definition that expands the idea of structural violence. The notion of structural violence was proposed in the 1960s by Johan Galtung, who defined it as the cause of the difference between the potential and actual level of a human being’s realization. His definition focused primarily on the social and economic structures affecting the actualization of one’s potential. In the past decades, the notion of structural violence has been fruitfully developed within critiques of neoliberal capitalism, feminist theory, and African American studies, but there is no shared definition of what violence is. In the main section of the paper I propose a definition of violence based on Galtung’s view. Specifically, I propose to expand the scope of the concept so as to account for particular forms of violence that target a human being’s capacity to live a fully human life, in particular race- and gender-based oppression. On my view, such capacity is not only determined by the material conditions of one’s existence, but also by one’s ability to be recognized and treated as fully human. This ability encompasses emotional, social, and political dimensions. I conclude that violence is the quality of any action or interaction affecting one’s ability to express their human potential in all these senses and that, once we accept such definition, we may be presented with the implication that all of our actions are violent.

Nothing to See Here: On Violence, Vulnerability and Witnessing in Judith Butler’s work.
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The proposed paper aims to account for the meaning of violence in the groundbreaking work of Judith Butler on vulnerability from Precarious Life (2004) to Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly (2015). Vulnerability, for Butler, is a dual ontological openness towards the other, which calls for the care as well as possible acts of violence. As the unrecognized aspect of contemporary neo-liberal and nationalized subjectivity, vulnerability opens us to the temptation of abusing the other for the sake of a phantasm of omnipotence, independence and revenge that aim to refute and deny humans’ vulnerability. The paper suggests an account of the unique forms of violence that stem from the denial of vulnerability. In the first part, I argue that for Butler, the denial of vulnerability leads to violence as dehumanization. Dehumanization is depriving bodies of their signifyingness and their ability to express life as significant moral fact. This, Butler argues, explains, at least in part, contemporary political reality in which there are those whose lives are not ‘real’ in the sense of getting the acknowledgment and protection of social institutions. The second part of the paper connects violence as denial of vulnerability with a discourse of visibility in social space. I argue, following Butler that violence that is based on the denial of the ‘realness’ of certain lives work through practices that visibility and invisibility. Thus, witnessing the vulnerability of others becomes an effective political tool for challenging the ethos of resilience that is in the heart of this new forms of violence. The last part of the paper demonstrates the relations between violence, dehumanization and vulnerability by looking at two cases of witnessing violence, against the authority of normative law. The first act of witnessing appears in the biblical story of the destruction of Sodom. The second case I discuss is the practice of witnessing of the Israeli anti-occupation organization of Maschom Watch.
defines violence via its ‘instrumental character’ (On Violence, p. 46). Given her association of violence and strength, her definition is of violence is at once too broad an too narrow: too broad, since there are cases of physical damage done to another person who is treated ‘instrumentally,’ which are no cases of violence, e.g. medical operations. On the other hand, Arendt’s concept of violence is to narrow, since by restricting violence to physical violence she excludes a vast range of actions properly called psychological violence, as e.g. certain techniques of torture or mobbing. The second aim of the paper is show that, given Arendt’s problematic concept of violence, her claim that “power” and ‘violence’ are mutually exclusive ways of establishing of stabilized social orders, is unconvincing. On the one hand, stable social structures, I will argue, finally rely on the thread of (physical) violence which awaits those who violate the corresponding social norms; power and violence, are thus not only not mutually exclusive, they are mutually dependent. On the other hand, while Arendt at various points notes the infringement on individual lives that “power” can lead to, her very own concepts of ‘power’ and ‘violence’ prevent us from clearly stating what happens in this case: violence.