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Violence and Problems of the Phenomenological Method

Keywords: phenomenology of violence, eidetic reduction, phenomenological epoché, ethical epoché, responsive phenomenology

Słowa kluczowe: fenomenologia przemocy, redukcja ejdetyczna, fenomenologiczna epoché, etyczna epoché, fenomenologia responsywna

Abstract

The first part of the article outlines three problems in the phenomenology of violence: the relation between violence and order, the desideratum for an integrative concept of violence, and the perspectivity of violence. This leads to the question of whether the eidetic reduction applies to the analysis of violence. The second part discusses the method of the *epoché* in the phenomenology of violence. Through the reconstruction of Husserl's position, the distinction between the universal phenomenological epoché and the ethical epoché is presented. It is argued that the latter concept is taken up by Bernhard Waldenfels and developed through the lens of his responsive phenomenology. This interpretation can be applied to deal with the problem of the justification of violence as proposed by Michael Staudigl, which allows us to analyze violence as a violation.

Introduction

Violence is no longer a mere side topic for phenomenology. This, however, does not mean that it has been a subject of interest since phenomenology's inception. For the first generations of phenomenologists, it was not the central issue in this philosophy. This is striking when we consider the overwhelming reality of violence surrounding the early figures of the phenomenological movement: antisemitism, war, and the patriarchal social order belonged to the lifeworlds in which Edmund Husserl, Roman Ingarden, and Edith Stein—three exemplary figures of the early movement—lived, acted, and thought.

Recently, different phenomenological accounts of violence have been introduced, which have contributed to the formation of an explicit problem field marked by complex and stimulating discussion. This can be traced back to early contributions by Waldenfels, who has discussed violence through the lens of his responsive phenomenology (Waldenfels, 1991, 2006). Furthermore, important book-length studies by James Dodd (Dodd, 2009, 2017) and by Michael Staudigl (Staudigl, 2015) are worth noting. The latter has also edited collective volumes, e.g., *Phenomenologies of Violence* (2014), which helped consolidate the field. Currently, there are various phenomenological approaches to the issue developed by scholars such as James Mensch, Christian Ciocan, Pascal Delhom, and Debra Bergoffen, to mention only a few.

Recent phenomenology has been showing an intensified interest in social and political reality. In the German-speaking field, one encounters terms such as *political phenomenology* (Bedorf & Herrmann, 2020), or *phenomenologies of the political* (Staudigl, 2025). One speaks not only of a "*political turn* [emphasis added] of contemporary phenomenology" (Herrmann et al., 2024, p. 2), but also of challenges and dangers posed by such a *politicization of phenomenology* (Rinofner-Kreidl, 2025).[1] Within this broader phenomenon of "politicization" we also find the emergence of the influential and stimulating movement of *critical phenomenology*, committed not only to the "transformation of classical phenomenology" but also to *social and*

[1] This collective interest has led to several edited volumes, including *Political phenomenology: Experience, ontology, episteme* (Bedorf & Herrmann, 2020), *The Routledge handbook of political phenomenology* (Hermann et al., 2024), and *Phänomenologien des Politischen* (Staudigl, 2025).

political transformation more broadly.[2] The latter caused quite a stir in phenomenological philosophy, especially in provoking intensified debates on the phenomenological method (Salamon, 2018; Davis, 2020; Guenther, 2021; Aldea et al., 2022; Oksala, 2022; Heinämaa, 2025). The problem of violence may be considered in interaction with these trends, as it constitutes one of the grave issues of social and political reality.

I believe that phenomenology offers unique tools to analyze violence. Drawing on resources from the rich phenomenological tradition, one can describe violence without reducing it to a pre-given essence or to a causal explanation. Instead, violence can be described as a lived experience from the first-person perspective, including the interplay of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, embodiment, and the world. A distinctive feature of this approach is thus its non-reductive perspective, which is grounded in its methodology. Nonetheless, if we situate violence "against" phenomenology, we are confronted with a fundamental methodological concern: is it even possible to analyze violence phenomenologically? Is violence a sense-correlate, or rather something that undermines the possibility of sense constitution? Should it be considered as a "limit phenomenon," "limit-problem," or perhaps even a "limit-situation" (Mensch, 2017; Ciocan, 2025)? Is violence even a "phenomenon" in the classical sense?[3] This liminal character of violence brings about methodological problems in the way in which *Grenzprobleme* motivate reflection on the methodological foundations of phenomenology.

In this article, I problematize two aspects of the phenomenological method when applied to violence: *eidetic reduction* and *epoché*. The former is presented against the backdrop of three problems: the relation between violence and order, the proposition of an integrative concept of violence, and the perspectivity of violence. The latter is challenged insofar as we consider the justification of violence. I show how Husserl differentiates between *universal epoché* and *ethical epoché* and argue that the ethical epoché gains a distinctive interpretation through Waldenfels's responsive phenomenology. This interpretation can be applied to address the justification of violence, as

[2] The movement is also reflected in *50 concepts for a critical phenomenology* (Weiss et al., 2020), *Critical phenomenology: An introduction* (Magrì & McQueen, 2023), and the journal *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology* (published since 2018).

[3] For discussions of reformulations of the notion of the phenomenon, especially (but not exclusively) in French-speaking phenomenology (Gondek & Tengelyi, 2011, Novotný, 2012, Drwięga, 2019).

shown by Michael Staudigl. The aim of the article is not to resolve all the issues or to apply a ready-made methodology. Instead, it aims to point to certain methodological challenges and discuss one prospect of addressing them, i.e., through considering ethical epoché in a distinct sense, as a supplement to phenomenological epoché.

1. Three Problems of Violence and Eidetic Reduction

1.1. Violence and Order

Violence requires a change of perspective for a phenomenologist. The reality at stake cannot be considered a normal example of an external perception, which flows concordantly and is only accidentally destabilized by minor intrusions of abnormality (Steinbock, 1995). Violence carries a moment of *disturbance* as something disrupting, inhibiting, and potentially destroying the established order. It can be argued that it is not an instance of a "normal anomaly" (Hua XV, p. 212), which is predictable and, in a sense, familiar, so that one expects, overall, that everything will go on as planned. Thus, violence does not inhabit order in the way that, for instance, our daily routines of eating do. It carries a moment of strangeness that situates it on the border of the ordinary.

Nonetheless, to draw a strict dichotomy between violence and order would be a mistake. After all, violence is regulated, ritualized, and enters into various forms of discursivity, for example, in games and sports, in religion, or in the media and images (Waldenfels, 2006; Ciocan, 2021). Violence and order enter into a complex, tense relationship that cannot be reduced to a simple opposition. Drawing on Waldenfels, one can go so far as to argue that every form of order carries an unavoidable residuum of violence that can be traced back to its institution. That which *makes* the emergence of an order possible is never fully removed by that which was *made* possible. Each order is essentially selective and exclusive, and there is no ultimate justification for this being so-and-so. The exclusion from the order cannot be fully justified by recourse to an ultimate foundation, because no order rests on such a foundation (Waldenfels, 2011a, pp. 8–21).

It is problematic to draw a strict distinction between violence and its counterpart. Traditional propositions such as violence versus reason or violence versus culture result in aporias (Staudigl, 2015, pp. 11–50). It can be argued that reason can be instrumentalized in the service of violence, and violence can operate according to its own forms of rationality. This is the case if we think of violence in terms of instrumentality, as something that is used to achieve certain goals, as in Carl von Clausewitz's famous phrase conceiving war as "the continuation of politics by other means." Furthermore, if we attempt to consider violence as simply belonging to the "barbaric state of nature," that is, annulled through a social contract, we seem to be abstracting from various forms of legitimized violence, such as the state's monopoly on the use of coercion or—to refer to Foucault—various disciplinary institutions (e.g., the penitentiary or the education system). It might be the case that the dichotomy between non-violent reason and unreasonable violence, as well as that of non-violent culture being haunted by barbaric outbreaks of the state of nature, is a "beautiful and simple fable" (Waldenfels, 2006, p. 77).

Following Waldenfels (1991, pp. 101–103), we can observe that the relationship between violence and order can be categorized. Violence can *serve* order as part of its strategy of self-preservation (inscribed in law, or legitimized uses of coercion), or it can *counter* order (as in revolts or revolutions aimed at overthrowing existing political structures). We can also speak of a confrontation *between* orders, each inhabited by its own structures of legitimization. It is especially this last situation that brings about the vicious circle of *violence* and *counter-violence*, where the use of force is justified as merely responding to some previous act of violence conceived as barbaric, senseless, and/or simply unjustified.

This means that the relationship between violence and order is neither that of familiarity or homogeneity nor that of separation and opposition. This is indeed a problem, because we seem to lack a stable ground from which the thematization of violence could achieve clarity regarding its essence. Violence is liminal, but at the same time inscribed in the orders that enable our everyday engagement with the world. It destabilizes our thinking, but at the same time we cannot reach a position of absolute violence-neutrality in thought without a certain naivety. This should not imply a form of fatalism, but instead a vigilant and perhaps even a skeptical way of thinking (Dodd, 2017) that would attend to the conceptual problematicity of the matter at hand.

1.2. The Integrative Concept of Violence

There are numerous different things and situations that could be described as violence, but it is not clear what links them. Think of such phenomena as a punch in the face, suicide, gaslighting, racial segregation, colonialism, deportation, child neglect, economic exploitation, pollution, hate speech, war footage, or everyday microaggressions. We can attempt to find a semantic core for the concept of "violence," which could justify its use in all these different contexts, but most intuitive propositions collapse, either providing a definition that is too broad or too narrow. "Physical force" would exclude mental injuries; "harmful intention" would not account for indirect suffering caused by pollution; "lack of legitimation" could not account for state-sanctioned violence.

The conceptual problems with violence are rooted in its semantic ambiguity. In analyzing these different phenomena, one can establish certain distinctions that can help us navigate them. We can distinguish physical violence that involves bodily harm from psychological violence involved in derogatory speech, insults, or threats, which does not have to involve physical contact. Both can be analyzed through a structure of *actor–act–recipient* (Waldenfels, 2006), meaning that somebody does something to someone else. Furthermore, we can observe, following Christian Ciocan, that a violent encounter can be both *symmetrical* and *asymmetrical* (Ciocan, 2020). The former can be illustrated by a duel, where two parties enter the event as active poles. The latter finds its extreme exemplification in the case of torture, where the maximization of the activity of one party is parallel to an extreme form of passivity in the other.

However, we can find other forms of violence that cannot, in principle, be traced back to one specific actor that could be identified as a responsible party. In the case of structural violence, a concept introduced by Johan Galtung (one of the key founders of the discipline of peace and conflict studies), we speak of violence as a *process* in which different parties participate and contribute to it in differing degrees. Structural violence is an *indirect* form of violence that is rooted in social, economic, and political structures that are sustained by an interplay of different actors. This could manifest in gaps in life expectancy between different groups that are not grounded in a lack of resources for their prevention, but rather in, e.g., their unequal distribution. This gap between "potential realizations" and "actual realization" is what lies at the core of the definition of violence that, according to Galtung, should bring together both personal-direct violence and structural-indirect violence under one concept. For him, violence can be conceived as "the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is." Violence is that which either "increases the distance between the potential and the actual" or "impedes the decrease of this distance" (Galtung, 1969, p. 168).

Broadening the conceptual scope of the notion of violence opens the discussion about its indirect forms that function on the level of culture, knowledge, or norms. These dimensions are thematized by such concepts as Johan Galtung's *cultural violence* (role of culture in justifying both structural and personal violence), Pierre Bourdieu's *symbolic violence* (a habitualized and embodied relation of domination), or Judith Butler's *normative violence* (exclusive and oppressive aspect of functioning norms).[4] It might be the case that including these aspects would presuppose a broad concept that would be faced with the problem of distinguishing different levels of violence in a way that would do justice to different recipients without flattening harms and comparing that which is incomparable. It is crucial to signal these debates when one speaks of a concept of violence, but their thorough discussion would lead me too far astray from the scope of this article.

These different notions point to the problem of establishing an "integrative concept of violence" that could consider these "many faces of violence as parts of a unified phenomenon" (Staudigl, 2014, p. 4). While this might be a plausible desideratum for phenomenological violence research, it also poses a methodological question concerning eidetic methodology. It might be the case that eidetic variation, which attempts to link the different facets of the phenomenon, would find irresolvable tensions rather than similarities. This poses a challenge for the operation of identifying an invariant, an unchanging core of the matter at hand, which remains the teleological correlate of the eidetic reduction (Husserl, 1973, pp. 340–348).

[4] For the discussion of these different concepts through the lens of postcolonial studies, see Brunner (2020).

1.3. Perspectivity of Violence

It is widely discussed that phenomenological analysis of violence must recognize the irreducible perspectivity of the phenomenon (Staudigl, 2015; Delhom, 2019; Ciocan, 2020). The experiential spectrum of violence spreads from the perspective of its actors, recipients, and observers. This perspectivity, however, differs from the eidetic insight into the perspectival givenness of the external object in perception that Husserl has analyzed. One should carefully consider the extent to which eidetic investigations of the latter can be translated into similar observations about perception in the experience of violence.

For Husserl, the experience of objectivity in perception is not the correlate of my primordial (solipsistic) experience, but receives the status of genuine perception insofar as it includes the intersubjective dimension (Zahavi, 1997). This means that the other, as co-constitutor, plays a central role in Husserl's reflections on the constitution of objectivity. My necessarily limited, and essentially "inadequate" perception (Hua I, pp. 96–97/61–62) implies the other as viewing the same reality from another perspective. I perceive it from "here," while the other perceives it from "there," where the latter cannot be reduced to the former. The interplay of these perspectives, and crucially the possibility of their concordant unification, is what enables the experience of the shared world grounded in intending the same objectivities.

This shared intentionality is central to the conception of transcendental intersubjectivity that Husserl developed in his late writings. According to him, each subject is conscious of itself while simultaneously being conscious of the world and of the other. Intersubjectivity means that intentionalities interpenetrate each other (Hua VI, p. 258/255), where one's own and alien validities are connected in modes of concordance and discordance. However, the modes of discordance always occur against the backdrop of an ineliminable possibility of correction, which grants that the unification of different perspectives is conceived "in advance as possibly attainable by everyone" (Hua VI, p. 166/163). This means that "always and necessarily, through reciprocal correction, agreeing consciousness of the same common world with the same things finally achieves validity" (Hua VI, p. 257/254). For Husserl, this signifies that the different perspectives in intersubjectivity are transformed into "mere appearances of the world, the life-world for all" (Hua VI, p. 258/255).

I do not mean to question this fundamental reflection. Rather, I would like to point to very different initial circumstances in the experience of violence. How would the latter appear against the backdrop of intersubjectivity as a diverse field of varying degrees of concordance and discordance, which is dynamically interconnected by processes of correction? It is plausible to argue that inasmuch as there is an ongoing event of violence, this possibility of correction, which conditions the intentional grasping of the "one world" or "world for everyone," is put into question. In other words, the phenomenology must consider that the "reciprocity of perspectives" may not apply to violence (Staudigl, 2015, p. 71).

This is the case for extreme forms of asymmetrical violence, such as torture, where we might speak of extreme *polarity* between recipients and actors of violence (Breyer, 2016), but also in cases of symmetrical violence, which occur in the horizon of being against one another that tends to make different perspectival accesses to the phenomenon at stake into something that resists reconciliation. In the experience of violence, what we encounter is, from the outset, a certain polarization of perspectives. Participants in violence, considered as a "relational event" (Staudigl, 2015, p. 63), are not necessarily unified by the overarching and common goal of objectivity. Rather, they encounter an event of disruption, which may challenge the very plurality of perspectives and the possibility of a shared space of meaning (Mensch, 2014, 2017), because at the heart of this relational event we find a functioning *antagonism* (Ciocan, 2020, 2025).

The problem of the perspectivity of violence again puts at stake the eidetic method. This should not imply its rejection, but rather a need to rethink the scope to which it is applicable. Insofar as violence can be considered a limit problem for this methodology, we are confronted with the question of methodological transformation.

2. Phenomenological Epoché, Ethical Epoché, and the Phenomenology of Violence

In the previous section, I discussed three problems that, in my view, pose a challenge to eidetic methodology. Now, I turn to the second methodological challenge, that of applying the method of epoché. Although for Husserl the "breakthrough" (Hua VI, p. 169/166) into phenomenology was made in the *Logical Investigations*, the mature phenomenological project begins in the laboratory of the phenomenological attitude, which ultimately opens the phenomenological field through epoché and *reduction*. These constitute the fundamentals of the phenomenological methodology, which, nonetheless, remain saturated with inherent problematicity throughout the lifework of their inventor and beyond. Husserl ultimately discussed different "paths to reduction" such as the Cartesian path, the path through psychology, or the path through the lifeworld (Kern, 1962). The first is associated with the initial formulation of transcendental phenomenology that we find in *Ideas I*, which Husserl later criticizes, and the distancing gesture is made possible through discussion of the alternatives mentioned (Hua VI; Hua VIII).

Husserl offers us a unique philosophical project that, from the outset, is framed by an ever-recurring methodological question, in which different problems are encountered in intrinsic connection with the exposition of the method. In such a problem field as violence studies, where the very phenomenal nature of the issue at stake is challenging, slips from intentional grasp or even opposes it, this methodological focus is of utmost importance. Nonetheless, we must carefully observe the foundational motives that are very strong in Husserl's perspective: the quest for rigorous science, the idea of the "first philosophy," the ambition of absolute lack of presuppositions, and the striving for apodicticity might be at odds with attempts to analyze experiences in which what is at stake are forms of both subjective and intersubjective disturbances.

I argue that we need an epoché to set aside the "natural attitude" when approaching violence, in order not to reduce it to, e.g., a causal explanation. However, violence also occurs as paired with its justification strategy. For this reason, we should consider supplementing methodology with an "ethical epoché." This term is discussed by Husserl and plays an important role in his ethics. Its application to the problem of violence as the suspension of justification strategies, which results in the thematization of violence as violation, requires us to go beyond Husserl and include some concepts of Waldenfels's responsive phenomenology.

2.1. Natural Attitude and Phenomenological Epoché

At the core of the epoché lies the suspension of the natural attitude. The latter is defined as the everyday, unreflected mode in which the surrounding world presents itself as being "simply there," "on hand." The conscious life that is oriented by this cognitive tendency remains unthematized and operates without any critical hesitation. It posits the world as the "factually existent actuality," and accepts it as such (Hua III, p. 63/57). This is the *general positing of the natural attitude*. It is not altered by any doubt, negation, or alteration regarding this or that appearance within the world, which is why the *general thesis* is not a particular act, nor a judgment of existence, but precisely something prevailing throughout the duration of the attitude. The increasingly precise determination of this world is the perceived aim of the sciences belonging to the natural attitude. The natural world prevails "on hand" and "simply there" as long as the latter remains undisturbed by a *new attitude* (Hua III, p. 61/55).

The way of dealing with the natural attitude is the opening gesture of phenomenological philosophy as such. It is a reflection that does not remain within the natural attitude but attempts its radical alteration. This is a point at which Husserl introduces his own methodological perspective. The method employed concerning the general thesis is that of *bracketing*. Each thesis can be modified, and bracketing is precisely a specific kind of *modification* of a thesis. Through this operation, the positing in question is *annulled*: it "remains what it is," but it is "*put out of action*," "*excluded*," "*parenthesized*." It is retained as "the parenthesized in the parentheses," or "the excluded in the context of inclusion." The positing remains part of the mental process, but we "*make 'no use' of it*" (Hua III., p. 59). Bracketing adds a specific mode of consciousness to the original positing, one in which a *change in value* of the original positing occurs.

This modification is something distinct not only from *doubt* but also from *negation*. This is the case because doubt is a *doxic modification* of belief that turns from certainty to uncertainty and ultimately to disbelief about something. This is not the case with bracketing, which does not in any way change the doxic attitude regarding the real world. The latter remains posited with absolute certainty, and is resistant to any sort of doubt. Furthermore, bracketing is *not* a negation. It is not the case that bracketing issues a sort of counter-positing, which annuls the previous positing and replaces it with a belief in the non-being of the world. This proposition is described as *sophistry*, and the phenomenological perspective should be definitively distinguished from it.

This subtle argument remains clear when we consider isolated existential positings in experiential life. Epoché as bracketing would allow us to grasp particular objects in their "how," that is, as phenomena of consciousness. However, Husserl encounters a problem when we try to establish a *universal and phenomenological* epoché as the neutralization of the entire world belief. For Husserl, this is not achievable through mere bracketing of individual validities and domains of being one by one. This is the case because each validity is given in the horizon, which entails co-consciousness of other validities and is ultimately grounded in the persistent validity of the world-horizon (Hua VI, pp. 145–146/142–143). This is why the universal epoché cannot but attempt to overcome the natural attitude not step-by-step, but rather radically—"with one blow" (*mit einem Schlage*, Hua VI, pp. 78/77, 153/150, 242/239).

This issue is taken up in his lecture course from the winter semester 1923–1924, which was published under the title *Erste Philosophie II* as the eighth volume of *Husserliana*. There, he outlines the "theory of the phenomenological reduction" and presents the distinction between the first path (Cartesian) and the second path (psychological). The Cartesian path proceeds from the requirement for an Archimedean point of absolute certainty, which requires a rigorous critique of world belief as a whole that would lead to consciousness as a "residuum" of world-bracketing. For the path through psychology, what is at stake is to leave the confines of phenomenological psychology and enter the transcendental attitude *sensu stricto*, which is characterized by the attitude of the "disinterested observer." But insofar as we speak here of the attitude of disinterestedness regarding the *whole* world, i.e., the world horizon in its totality, Husserl encounters the central question, "What could be the *motive* for this?" (Hua VIII, 98/302).

2.2. Ethical Self-Reflection and Ethical Epoché

This leads him to a unique reflection in which he attempts to establish an analogy between universal *ethical self-reflection* (*Selbstbesinnung,* Hua VIII, 154/355) and universal phenomenological epoché, where his initial hypothesis is that the former could function as a preparatory step for the latter. He posits that the reflection about the ethical life of oneself as a person "can prepare us to glean the possibility of a rigorous universal Epoché" (Hua VIII, 155/356).

This preparation starts with an important distinction between different kinds of personal reflections: reflections on *single affections or acts* (which become articulated as “I perceive…,” “I judge…,” “I like/dislike…,” etc.); reflections on *entire stretches of life* (e.g., past student life, or the coming Easter holidays); reflections on *my entire life.* Each reflection can be accompanied by an evaluative act or an act of will and ultimately lead to a future-oriented decision. For instance, I might appreciate my past actions and want to continue them, but I might also critically evaluate my past life (e.g., student life) and decide to act differently in the future.

The most radical reflection entails carrying out a “universal critique of my entire life up to now” (Hua VIII, 154/355), which is followed by a decision about my entire future life. Although this decision might be oriented by a “universal value valid uncritically” (a value affirmed naively, such as power or success), what Husserl aims at is a truly ethical life subordinated to “ethical self-reflection, self-critique, and self-governance” (Hua VIII, 154/355). This possibility serves to establish an authentically ethical life, but it can also function as a preliminary step to the universal phenomenological epoché. This is the case because radical critical self-reflection requires one to “posit out of action all validities at once” (Hua VIII, 153/354), which includes their past, present, and future horizons.

However, precisely at this point Husserl makes an important correction. In Supplement 10, the initial hypothesis that was discussed in the lecture is rejected. It is only here that Husserl explicitly distinguishes between phenomenological epoché and *ethical epoché* and notices a fundamental difference between them: “the ethical Epoché has an entirely different universality than the phenomenological one” (Hua VIII, 319/516).

He characterizes ethical epoché as confined to the *personal acts*, i.e., validities posited in the personalistic attitude. He specifies that it concerns “all acts related to the *absolute ought*” (*absolutes Sollen*) and the relevant validities in the “*universal practical field*” (Hua VIII, 319/517, emphasis added). However, in the radical ethical self-reflection, “*the pregiven world*” is always presupposed as that to which personal actions remain related. This means that “the ontic validity of the world is *not affected*” (Hua VIII, 319/516, emphasis added). The ethical epoché therefore remains within the natural attitude as it leaves intact the surrounding world of the personal subject. Thus, while the ethical epoché suspends the personal validities of my entire life up to now, the universal phenomenological epoché brackets the entire world-thesis in one stroke.

The notion of the ethical epoché plays an important role as part of Husserl's ethics, especially his "late ethics" developed after World War I (Melle, 2002; Geniusas, 2023; Laferté-Coutu, 2024). However, what is crucial for me in this article is its different reading, one that brings important insights into the prospect of phenomenological analysis of violence.

2.3. Responsive Phenomenology and Ethical Epoché

Waldenfels reads this specific passage from the *Erste Philosophie II* through the lens of responsive phenomenology. This perspective is centered on the experience of the *alien* as something encountered beyond the established order. It is characterized by the difference between the demands of *pathos* and the *response* to it, where the latter can never replace or even fully articulate the former. This approach, articulated in numerous books and articles, also develops *responsive ethics* through which the ethical epoché gains a distinguished meaning.

Waldenfels seeks a way to formulate the domain of responsive ethics as dealing with the level that precedes established rules, values, and laws. This is rooted in the *responsive difference* between that "to which" (*worauf*) we respond and the "what" (*was*) of the content of the specific answer we provide. The former is articulated in terms of *pathos,* understood as *Widerfahrnis*, that is, as something that happens to us, that befalls us, in a way that slips the grasp of anticipation. In answering it, we become *respondents*, but always remain related to it as *patients*.

If we situate ethics against these distinctions, the experience "from which" it wants to articulate itself acquires characteristics of a "radicalized experience" (Waldenfels, 2011b), understood as an *event* (*Ereignis*) that can be accessed only indirectly and requires a specific methodological step. The latter, in reference to Husserl (Hua VIII, 319/516), Waldenfels calls an *ethical epoché*, but offers a specific interpretation of the relevant fragment:

> By putting out of action the validity of the prevailing morality, it [ethical epoché] actually gives rise to a new kind of ethos. This ethos breaks through the everyday attitude, in which we take the morality for granted, even if we question or oppose it.
>
> (Waldenfels, 1998, p. 9, translation M.M.)

What the ethical epoché should open is the ethical *in statu nascendi* (Merleau-Ponty) and the ethical in the strong sense, where the claim of the other articulates itself (Levinas). What interests him are the "blind spots" that characterize each moral order, that follow from the characterization of every order as selective, exclusive, and instituted, but never ultimately founded. Each moral conception carries an irreducible contingency, from which its own categories emerge, but which cannot be explained through them.

To make this layer tangible, Waldenfels echoes the Nietzschean gesture of the "genealogy of morals" and of going "beyond good and evil" as he wants to trace the ethics back to the point *before* the emergence of the dualities of wrong or right, good or bad, legal or illegal (Waldenfels, 1998, p. 8; Waldenfels, 2024, pp. 11–12). Responsive ethics is "born from pathos" (Waldenfels, 2024), that is, from the demand of the alien that affects us before we can respond to it by applying a rule.

Ethical epoché, in this reading, abandons "what we practically take for granted," but it does not discover an absolute ought that "leaves all relativities behind." Instead, what is required is a "*special kind* of ethical epoché," that is, the *responsive epoché* which, "starting from what we intend, goes back to the demands to which we respond when we say or do something" (Waldenfels, 2014, p. 194, emphasis added). As such, responsive epoché goes back from the responses as rule-guided, meaningful, and value-laden to the *pathic*, which interrupts and demands an answer (Waldenfels, 2011a, p. 32).

What is crucial here is that this methodology does not result in indifference, but rather seeks the thematization of the alien *as* alien, which is expressed in ethical categories of demand and responsibility even before it can be recognized by normative ethics as, e.g., a subject of rights that articulates claims which can be considered valid or invalid. I believe that it is not the ethical epoché in a strictly Husserlian sense, but rather its interpretation that involves the perspective of responsive phenomenology, and specifically, responsive ethics. This reading can allow us to address one problem encountered in the phenomenology of violence.

2.4. Ethical Epoché and the Phenomenology of Violence

What is unique about the phenomenological approach to violence is the focus on the way something is experienced. The phenomenological epoché allows us to consider violence as *experienced* and not as "explained away" in the natural attitude. However, we need an additional methodological strategy that would address a different dimension of the phenomenon, which is not addressed through the suspension of the natural attitude in the Husserlian sense. As Waldenfels argued, an important part of the phenomenalization of violence is mediated through the functioning strategies involved in the justification of violence (Waldenfels, 1991; Maczuga, 2023).

For this reason, one can argue that a phenomenological approach to this issue requires an additional methodological gesture, one that addresses the matrix of appearance of violence, where it enters the phenomenal field as, in a sense, paired with its justification (or counter-justification) strategy. If we want to access violence *in statu nascendi*, we need to apply an epoché that would be vigilant to this layering of the phenomenon in question.

The application of the ethical epoché to this specific problem was proposed by Staudigl (2015, pp. 163–167). He takes up the main features of Waldenfels' reading of this operation and applies it to suspend "the normative justifications or legitimations of violence" (Staudigl, 2015, p. 166), which is needed if we want to analyze violence as *experienced* and not reduced to its preconceived essence, to a causal explanation, or mediated by the interplay of its justifications and counter-justifications.[5] What ethical epoché aims to show is that violence does not primarily appear on the reflective level, but rather affects the subject as an embodied being, triggering a responsive dynamic. It is a *Widerfahrnis*, an event that befalls us before we can act on its basis. Here, the recipient of violence is not (yet) the bearer of rights but rather enters the scene as articulating the demand not to be violated on the level preceding distinctions of "right and wrong" (Waldenfels, 2006, p. 80).

This perspective offers us the possibility to describe violence as a *violation* (*Verletzung*)[6] in a distinctive sense. Violence as a violation affects a being

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[5] This does not exhaust the scope of Staudigl's own project of the methodological transformation of phenomenology, which, in his view, is required in order to provide a phenomenological account of violence. However, discussing it in detail is beyond the scope of the present article.

[6] The German verb *verletzen* ("to violate/injure") is semantically rich and multidimensional. It covers:

a. Physical harm: bodily injury through impact or force.
b. Psychic harm: wounding of feelings, honor, dignity, etc.
c. Symbolic harm:

characterized by self-relatedness and integrity (Waldenfels, 2006). In this context, we can refer to the second volume of *Ideas*, where the distinctive feature of the animal being is characterized by its embodiment. The latter cannot be encapsulated by its physical characteristics, as something extended in space (*Körper*), because it is also a lived body (*Leib*), one that can feel, that is open to affectivity, and that cannot be fragmented without violation (Hua IV, pp. 32–33/35–36).

The sense of violation arises prior to consciousness as characterized by intentional dynamics, because it corresponds more fundamentally to the dimension that Emmanuel Levinas described in his analyses of the face of the Other (Levinas, 1979, pp. 194–219). The claim raised by the Other renders the Self responsible beyond the latter's sense-bestowal, which grants access to the Other as an intentional object. In this way, violence as violation disrupts what Levinas calls the *ethical resistance* (Ebd., p. 199) that the face, as transcendence, offers against the injury it suffers. Thus, violence as violation constitutes a negation of the responsiveness of an embodied subject. Due to this, it is marked by a certain *singularity*, which stems from the uniqueness of the demand raised from the recipient of violence.

This brings into play the question of the "ways in which violence violates (…) and how it is experienced in its inherent power to violate" (Staudigl, 2015, p. 164). To analyze it as such, it is plausible to argue that ethical epoché in this reading, i.e., as the suspension of moral, legal, or political justifications and counter-justifications of violence, is an important methodological strategy that carries the potential to broaden the applicability of phenomenology in the field of violence research.

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i. Violation of norms or laws (e.g., breaking confidentiality, etiquette, or legal boundaries).
ii. Violation of boundaries (e.g., national borders or airspace).

This semantic spread does not map cleanly onto English ("violation" emphasizes symbolic or moral breach) or Polish ("zranienie" leans toward physical injury). This polysemy of *verletzen* reflects the multilayered nature of violence itself and seems to be actively in play in German-speaking discussions of the subject. See *Duden Onlinewörterbuch* (Bibliographisches Institut GmbH, n.d.)

Conclusion

In this article, I have outlined three problems in the phenomenology of violence: the relation between violence and order, the desideratum for an integrative concept of violence, and the perspectivity of violence. This led me to the question of the applicability of the eidetic reduction to the analysis of violence. In the second part of the article, I have discussed a methodological problem connected with the epoché. In reconstructing Husserl's discussion of this operation, we encounter the distinction between universal phenomenological epoché and the ethical epoché. The latter concept was taken up by Bernhard Waldenfels and developed through the lens of his responsive phenomenology. This interpretation can be applied to deal with the problem of the justification of violence through the suspension of its justification strategies, as proposed by Michael Staudigl, which allows us to analyze violence as a violation.

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The Violence of Writing

Keywords: philosophy of writing, violence, humanism, metaphysics of presence

Słowa kluczowe: filozofia pisma, przemoc, humanizm, metafizyka obecności

Abstract

In this article, the author offers a systematic reflection on the violence of writing, drawing inspiration from Jacques Derrida's remarks in *Of Grammatology*. However, Derrida's philosophy is not in primary focus here; rather, the theme of the violence of writing is. First, a phenomenological reflection is undertaken on what the article itself is, in the context of the cultural conditions it must fulfill in order to exist at all as a scholarly work (i.e., to be published). In the next step, the author examines the philosophical meaning and validity of these conditions, referring to the history of European culture and the concept of humanism. Finally, the ontology of writing and the metaphysics of presence are discussed, as they have been accused of legitimizing violence on numerous accounts in 20th-century philosophy. Is this because metaphysics serves the power of writing? In conclusion, the question arises as to the possibility of doing philosophy other than in writing.

> Metaphysics has constituted an exemplary system of defense against the threat of writing. What links writing to violence? What must violence be in order for something in it to be equivalent to the operation of the trace?
>
> (Derrida, 1997, p. 101)

> Rousseau and Levi-Strauss are not for a moment to be challenged when they relate the power of writing to the exercise of violence.
>
> (Derrida, 1997, p. 106)

> For writing, obliteration of the proper classed in the play of difference, is the originary violence itself: pure impossibility of the 'vocative mark', impossible purity of the mark of vocation.
>
> (Derrida, 1997, p. 110)

> Anterior to the possibility of violence in the current and derivative sense, the sense used in *A Writing Lesson*, there is, as the space of its possibility, the violence of the arche-writing, the violence of difference, of classification, and of the system of appellations.
>
> (Derrida, 1997, p. 110)

> [W]riting cannot be thought outside of the horizon of intersubjective violence (...).
>
> (Derrida, 1997, p. 127)

> [I]f writing is to be related to violence, writing appears well before writing in the narrow sense; already in the difference or the arche-writing that opens speech itself.
>
> (Derrida, 1997, p. 128)

Toward the Phenomenology of Scientific Writing[1]

Before I interweave the aforementioned excerpts from Jacques Derrida's landmark writings with my considerations that follow, I will elaborate on them as I see fit, while also approaching them critically, without offering a separate philological and philosophical appraisal. Instead, I will examine what happens here—or rather, what appears here. This, however, does not imply that I want to begin *outside* writing. This is impossible for several reasons, particularly because my undertaking here is to publish a scholarly *paper*. I say this not for reasons of administrative particularity—which is always offensive to philosophy—but because I feel compelled by the enormity of *the matter itself.* When set in characters, my thoughts here are

[1] My cordial thanks to Tomasz Pałkowski for his translation of this essay from the Polish manuscript.

text indeed, understood as the primary area of appearing—a slit through which truth shines, bringing into view, out of the ontological murk, something that once was, for example, babble, total hogwash, or a cunning lie. It thus appears, first, as a text of a very specific type. This text exists only because there are other texts to which it refers. We read here what has already been written. Among all that happens here—constituting the original stimulus eliciting from us a certain attitude and an almost imperceptible series of reactions that trigger and direct our thinking—we encounter *our first* phenomenon: namely, the fact that we are dealing with writing that springs not from some absolute source but from concrete quoted material (Derrida's *Of Grammatology*), presented as "the word of another," as something that was written earlier and thus takes precedence. Our seeing the obviousness of this fact—its banality, normality and hence its apparent elusiveness—should constitute the first foothold and the path to follow in our reflection here. In opposition to many other methods of philosophical enquiry, *this* reflection claims, rightly or not, to be focused on "things themselves" and to give a faithful account of the encounter with phenomena in their undiluted form and the immediacy of their givenness. The fact that our thought, set in letters here, is the first phenomenon calls for what might be more accurately termed a *phenomenological* reflection—that is, its first question, which must seem like a spoiler or a spanner in the works: What is this text? Why are we writing and reading it now? Although this question appears in the form of the text you have just read, its uniqueness lies in the fact that—as is typical of many philosophical reflections that turn back upon themselves—by virtue of its questioning power it prevents thinking from being diluted in *what* it says, drawing our attention instead strictly to the form of its presentation (to *how* it says it).

Nevertheless, paying attention solely to the form of presentation is not very common in philosophy. Indeed, before philosophy became a measurable result of academic endeavors pursued in a strictly regulated form, which was designed to transmit only proven and secure knowledge—typically in the form of "philosophical routine" with a political and scientific slant—philosophy relied on reflection and chose its own means of communication. Even if the latter, through the prism of historically oriented academic studies of philosophy, is confined to choosing between specific literary genres, this very fact shows how important it is to ask about the manner of presentation, not only in terms of investigating the truth but also in terms of its presentation. In order to reduce the sense of peculiarity pervading our considerations (though it seems peculiarity should not be altogether eliminated from a philosophical text), let us recall that *phenomenology*, chosen here as a style of philosophical thinking, refers to this "how" in multiple ways, making our preliminary remarks here well-motivated precautions that serve to shield philosophical thought from the looming specter of dogmatism, lurking not only in the dark recesses of irrationality but also in indisputable, functional, and pragmatically justifiable "enlightened" practices of the public creation, transmission, and storage of academic knowledge. For not only is the object of phenomenology (phenomenon) a certain *way* of encountering and gaining access to something (Heidegger, 1999, § 13), a certain *way* of appearing and the being of what is (Heidegger, 1996, §7), but also, as Eugen Fink puts it, the "absolute medium" (Fink, 1958, p. 120). It follows that the corresponding philosophical reflection and the manner of its expression are a consistent attempt at thinking about philosophy primarily and critically as a *way* of being and taking cognizance. Contemporary phenomenology, conscious of its successes and (even more) of its failures, knows no principled approach conceived in dogmatic terms. As a *media philosophy*, phenomenology cannot, by definition, be solidified in the final and inscrutable—first or last as such—since all it has at its disposal to reflect on the medium-like nature of experience is transitional and somewhere "in between". Phenomenology is thinking in passing, in motion, and through mediation.[2]

So what do we learn from this *phenomenology of writing* written here—that is, that which we find the closest and most obvious at the moment, and which has constituted, for quite some time now, the "natural" philosophical locus for thought and expression? Of writing, which, as the medium of *this* philosophical reflection, instantly grabs our attention and has framed the violence mentioned in the title of my essay in a way that, perhaps, has deprived us (or itself) of the opportunity to touch its extratextual form. Have we not had enough of *this* violence to know what violence as such is?

Let us reiterate what we have just said, this time pointing to a *compulsion*, as it were, to treat violence philosophically in its most familiar form as a textual phenomenon that points to—as implied by Derrida's quotations

[2] This understanding of phenomenology results from the radicalisation of its principle of "persistence in questioning" (Płotka, 2012; Sobota, 2023).

recalled at the beginning—its underlying principle of writing, or even Writing. If "first philosophy" can manifest an irrepressible, radical ambition to open up—in a totally assumptionless manner—to the truth of what appears, its contemporary, phenomenological variant does precisely that, assuming the role of a media philosophy, whose first and foremost obligation is to reflect on *the way* it shows itself as a *medium* within which the phenomenon appears. Interestingly, during the constant radicalization of this reflection—most vividly exemplified, as we believe, by the legitimate correction of phenomenology carried out by the young Heidegger from the vantage point of the philosophy of life and the philosophy of existence (Sobota, 2012–2013)—phenomenology debunks the myth of the disinterested observer, seeing in this figure the creation of the dominant theoretical stance that would not be possible without the popularization and interiorization of *literary practices*. Paradoxically, phenomenology also admits to its liberating involvement in the constitution of the phenomenon by virtue of being together, feeling together, and working together (intersubjectivity)—in the community of experience and common being in the world. This primordial situation proves that phenomenology cannot be practiced purely theoretically, "on paper," as a practice that has come to seem "natural" to philosophy, from a moment during its historical development that was intertwined, in one way or another, with the advances of communication technology. The Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian radicalization of phenomenology led to the understanding that it is not a theoretical activity but a totally performative one (Cimino, 2013)—that is, one that somehow "creates" the thing to be cognized. This happens during cognition, consistently with the radically interpreted postulate of assumptionlessness, which rules out the reception of anything that is *already* given—even the phenomenon itself. This leads to a liberating insight into our own ways of capturing and presenting phenomena, which starts with the concrete *situation* that confines the cognizing phenomenologist, dictating its own conditions. As it happens—and this is no coincidence, as we shall see—our current situation, which is itself a phenomenon, is circumscribed by this specific writing practice and its historical, cultural, and philosophical conditioning—the practice in which both its subject and the approach to it taken by the cognizing person (author) and the recipients of the message (readers) are constituted. And there are many indications that this situation has a lot in common with the issue of violence. The basic question is this: Why is it so?

The answer to this question emerges through the invocation of several self-evident considerations that define our present situation and constitute the conditions of possibility for our scholarly activity here. Peer review practices, academic journal formats, and systems of knowledge evaluation are not—as is, moreover, well-known—neutral instruments for organizing science, but rather, in the spirit of Foucauldian discourse analysis, technologies of power that regulate the conditions under which academic utterance becomes possible. They do not merely select knowledge; they actively produce it by normalizing specific modes of writing, thinking, and truth legitimation. Peer review functions as a paradigmatic *dispositif*: a mechanism of control that determines who may speak in the name of science and under what conditions. The anonymity of reviewers intensifies power asymmetries—the author is subjected to evaluation, while the criteria of that evaluation often remain opaque and historically contingent. Categories such as "originality," "contribution," or "methodological rigor" are presented as objective, yet in practice they reflect dominant paradigms and institutional interests. Review does not so much uncover truth as establish what, at a given moment, may be recognized as knowledge. A similar function is performed by the academic journal format itself. Structural requirements (abstracts, the IMRaD model, word limits, citation styles) operate as instruments of discursive normalization. They privilege a particular type of rationality—concise, distanced, and impersonal—while marginalizing speculative, narrative, or affective forms. The journal is not merely a vehicle of content but an institution that selects what and who is to become visible: publication in a given venue positions the author within academic hierarchies, often independently of the epistemic value of the work itself. Contemporary evaluation systems—impact factors, h-indices, and ministerial scoring schemes—further intensify this process through the quantification of discourse. Knowledge is transformed into measurable capital, and scholarly activity is subordinated to the logics of productivity and competition. From the perspective of research on epistemic power, such metrics do not measure cognitive quality but conformity to dominant circuits of knowledge production, thereby reinforcing existing epistemic centers (the English language, the Global North). Throughout these processes, however, a decisive role is played by the technique of writing itself. Academic style is not a neutral medium—indeed, no such medium exists—but a material practice that produces a particular type of subject: the "scholarly author," disciplined, distanced, and aligned with institutional norms. Writing thus functions simultaneously as a technology of subjectivation and exclusion, eliminating alternative forms of knowledge and expression. Consequently, peer review, format, and evaluation are not ancillary to science but constitute its conditions of possibility and, as such, ought to be subjected to critical reflection.

Let us now relate the foregoing considerations to the specific situation of the present article and give a brief *phenomenological account* of what we are doing here and why. After all, my essay is what it is for a reason. Overall, it is not that the author chooses—from the wide range of means of expressing philosophical experience—"a scholarly paper", which is a strictly defined written form. Well, when we make existential decisions, all our actions can be considered our own and voluntary, but the concrete range of possibilities imposed on us by the world as privileged and the only "legitimate" one is not our doing. Rather, by "choosing" a specific "project of being" ("to be a scholar"), we endorse certain practices and conventions defined by quite rigid *standards*. We agree because, as we sometimes admit bitterly—paradoxically—"we have no choice". In the case of science, even if it is philosophy, not fully reconciled with its name, these standards are set by tradition and the current scientific policy pursued by social institutions responsible for the creation and preservation of desirable "scholastic habituses" (Bourdieu, 2000). They arise through writing exercises and the reading of scholarly literature of a specific format. For such practices to be effective, the format of the text need not be defined strictly; however, to satisfy the requirements of various institutions (national and international) that create and maintain the order of academic activities and the relevant capital flow, the editorial offices of journals and scientific publishers specify on their websites the "right" kind of scientific and philosophical experience.[3] They do so in accordance with their profile, which is legitimized by the licenses they have been granted.[4] All of this occurs in the administrative sphere,

[3] In so doing, they avoid the overly suspicious phrase "philosophical experience", readily replacing it with neutral "research".

[4] For example, here is what we read on the website of the journal Analiza i Egzystencja: "'Analysis and Existence' is a quarterly published by the University of Szczecin Press in paper version (the basic version) and electronically (in Open Access system); license CC BY-SA. The Journal is included in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). The Journal has been published since 2005, at the beginning twice a year, and since 2011 as a quarterly. Since 2007 the Journal has been listed in the DOAJ, since 2015

which imposes a way of thinking about the world as an order of "matters" that are possible to document. Owing to the increasing institutionalization and standardization of academic life that pervade the tiniest and, as it were, the most liberal (human) cogs in the global machinery of social administration of knowledge, the style of scientific literature increasingly resembles the office style of drafting and circulating documents. In this way, one arrives at a highly standardized, ordered, measurable, and countable set of "types of writing" that can be further subjected to administrative treatments through cataloging, parametrization, citation metrics, rankings, and, ultimately, archiving. These and other elements are known as bibliometrics. This is the normal course of things in a "bureaucratic society" (Weber, 1978, chapters 3 and 11), often appearing completely "natural" and functional despite our real feeling and ethical suspicion that we are subjected to violence and its derivatives. Well, "that's the way it is", "that's the way things are", or "there's no other way". No more, no less. So, why claim that writing in general and scholarly texts in particular have something to do with violence, a topic on which Derrida writes so extensively, without offering a clear explanation of this state of affairs? He asks, "What links writing to violence?" (Derrida, 1997, p. 101).

It may be, however, that Writing is not everything—that on the "margins of philosophy" and science, where the book meets the world, Writing loses its authority, and something that does not lend itself to the practice of textualization begins—something truly anarchic, out of which grows philosophical experience, whose diversity calls for many different "means of expression", not only writing. However, in the world we live in, the only means of expression that is admissible in the communication practice of science is writing—indeed, not just any kind of writing but a text like this.

Writing, Humanism, and Spectacle

While, from the vantage point of the "anarchy" of extratextual life, which—in "romantic" terms—appears to be the domain of freedom (from violence), any

in the European Reference Index for the Humanities (ERIH PLUS), and since 2016 in the SCOPUS" (https://wnus.usz.edu.pl/aie/en/). There is no question of the philosophical significance of the texts published, but the credibility and value of the journal is measured and certified by purely *bureaucratic* criteria.

kind of order (especially an administrative one) can be accused of unwarranted (is there any other?) use of violence. That said, we should approach such claims with caution. Using the term "violence" frivolously and extending its semantic scope unreasonably make its meaning less precise. When everything becomes violence, then in practice nothing is violence anymore, even acts of direct physical aggression. So again: Why would philosophical arguments in the form of scholarly papers have anything to do with violence? Is it simply because, in this way, as a rule, some aspects of the natural philosophical element are barred from manifesting themselves, while this element could otherwise manifest itself were other methods openly allowed? Even if this were the case, is it not absurd anyway to accuse written philosophy of resorting to violence, considering how much real violence has been disclosed and eliminated precisely thanks to socially and politically involved academic and philosophical literature? So what does Derrida write about?

Let us say this loud and clear: the widespread presence of writing in European culture must be judged, almost without exception, as beneficial and protective against violence. Instead of using elaborate arguments, let us pose a few rhetorical questions. Have we not fought illiteracy for centuries to defend ourselves against the violence of ignorance and stupidity? Do we not write down whatever is worth saving to defend ourselves against the violence of oblivion? Do we not build public schools, universities, libraries and archives to defend ourselves against social exclusion and inequality? Do we not lay down laws protecting individuals against stronger ones to combat injustice? Do we not establish high standards and regulations protecting the equality of individuals to guard against all kinds of corruption, nepotism, and mobbing? Was democracy—as a system where all are equal before the law—not invented to guard against despotism? Are human rights not there to protect people from violence? Would technological progress, which is driven by scientific research and has unquestionably benefited humankind in such spheres as medicine or education, be at all possible without the pervasive presence of writing? And all of this, after all, has been informed by some kind of philosophy—that kingly principle of rationality discovered by the Greeks and equated with European identity (as Husserl still saw it (Husserl, 1970), being perhaps unaware of the cultural particularism of his theses)—with its thoroughly *humanist* vision of humanity, dominating it for centuries, as well as "human rights" and the public institutions protecting them.

These clues can sufficiently demonstrate the problematic nature of the link between writing and violence, especially in the context of philosophy. This problem is all the more apparent if we see that, historically speaking, the culture of writing is the other side of *humanism*, which, as we have said, is more of a defense against violence than its cause. Again, instead of resorting to elaborate argumentation, let rhetoric speak, this time in the form of literature, where one of the most beautiful self-attestations is the statement made by Settembrini in his dispute with Naphta. It was no accident that the dispute began with an invocation of Virgil, who epitomized the golden age of Latin literature, which produced such humanist institutions as the canon, the classics, and literature.

> […] it was a matter of not of drawing symbols but of literature as a human impulse, of its spirit, which was Spirit itself, the miraculous conjunction of analysis and form. This it was that awakened the understanding of all things human, that operated to weaken and dissolve silly prejudices and convictions, that brought about the civilizing, elevating, and betterment of the human race. While it developed extreme ethical sensitiveness and refinement, far from being fanatical, it preached honest doubt, fairness, tolerance. The purifying, healing influence of literature, the dissipating of passions by knowledge and the written word, literature as the path to understanding, forgiveness and love, the redeeming might of the word, the literary spirit as the noblest manifestation of the spirit of man, the writer as perfected type, as saint […].
>
> (Mann, 1961, pp. 524–525)

A man who writes philosophical articles, as the protagonist of *The Magic Mountain* might go on to say, not only shuns violence, but also straightforwardly pursues the European vision of the humanist—that human being sanctified by writing. The vision, as can be easily seen, offers a wide range of measures protecting people against the violence of nature and other people. Let us dwell on this thread for a while, as it has already been studied extensively. Western civilization is a culture largely informed by literary practices, as it was created by people for whom so-called "humanist man" was and still is the guiding vision and ideal of themselves. Humanism defines man as a being who becomes what it is mainly through literary practices—through the use of writing in its *canonical* form of world literary masterpieces, not only as a tool for recording and conveying information, but also as a specific practice of self-formation—graphoanthropogenesis. By all historical accounts, the first designation of humanist man, who was born, developed and dominated European culture, is *homo literatus*. Western man is now what he is through writing, in writing, and for writing, because (or perhaps, *for that reason*—it is unclear what causes what), ontologically speaking, he is a writing and reading device. Since ancient times, European man has defined himself through metaphors, used not only as revealing stylistic devices, but also as designations for essential insights related to writing, such as Plato's and Aristotle's "wax tablet", *tabula rasa*, mentioned by Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, or the British empiricists, or the more recent term, *Wunderblock*, used by Freud. "Man" so understood is a common reference point for all, even the most revolutionary philosophies of man that arose in Europe. Humanism grew out of *graphocentrism* and cannot exist without it. This is why we *feel* that an attack on writing is an assault on what seems to be the most innocent, benevolent, and noble in European culture. We need only to recall the image of "burning books" to realize how devilish it all is. Let us put it bluntly: Naphta cannot be right!

The link between literary practices and humanism is confirmed by modernity by way of negation. Is it not today that we are experiencing a kind of crisis of humanist ideals concomitantly with a crisis of literacy? And is something new not evolving out of this, as illustrated, for example, by the image of young people bent over their mobile phones and lost on the internet—a picture that does not, to put it mildly, inspire optimism? Granted, such images illustrate the weight of the problem, but *our* diagnosis of the present "state of the world" does not allow the era of writing to be blamed for this crisis. On the contrary, we hold that European civilization is thoroughly a civilization of writing, which is now reaching the point of its fulfillment, despite the fact that, paradoxically, the so-called post-literary or post-writing era is said to have arrived (McLuhan, 1962; Dukaj, 2019). Writing, as we shall see later, is wayward and has an exceptionally ambivalent, two-headed nature that manifests itself through many paradoxes. The complete domination of writing, and therefore its violence, does not have to be manifested in the open domination of libraries and archives. Writing has many names and possibilities for consolidating its own hegemony. One of them is the beginning of the post-literary era. The fact that the development of new technologies has led some to speak of functional illiteracy, visual culture, the death of the book, and the post-literary era does not mean that Writing has stopped being an organizer of all kinds of beings. In their total subjection to the Writing principle, new technologies are creating substitutes for something else. For the first time in history, writing, as a system for generating signs, is capable on its own of creating phenomenal sensory, emotional, and aesthetic experiences of what used to be reserved for extratextual reality, that is, the world in its real dimension. Owing to new information technologies, writing is now building a virtual reality that has reached a degree of realism equal to or even exceeding that of reality (hyperreality). In so doing, Super-Writing produces its own Other (a virtual world), which simulates pre-literary experiences and practices, only for Writing, as it seems, to invisibly consolidate its dictatorship even further. In the modern "society of the spectacle" (Debord), writing and power acquire an entirely new dimension.

And again, a counter-argument can be proposed. We can ask whether accusing a certain technological invention of being violent—a certain form of preserving mental content so that it can be communicated to others—is an abuse, since we have just said that writing, as a method of perpetuating and disseminating a humanistic ideal, serves precisely as a defense against violence? Can we accuse a knife of being sharp? Leaving aside the violence of educational, political, social, economic, scientific, and technological systems (which we all have felt at some point), we can provide countless examples of this defensive and praiseworthy function of writing. Let me ask once more: can belles lettres or philosophy be accused of violence? Humanism as violence? Writing has written many beautiful chapters in human history. Undeniably, the ongoing bureaucratization of reality, its incessant, frenzied, and obsessive textual representation through terabytes of data, enveloping our reality in the ever-thicker fabric of text, generating colossal clouds of text (comprised of innumerable layers of information), regulations, laws, decrees, instructions, licenses, applications, reports, etc., does not mean that we should play down the role of law, literature, and philosophy, and the humanistic ideal of educating through writing. Rather, *bad* and *good* writing should be distinguished.[5]

If we maintain a balance and accept this twofold appraisal of writing in relation to violence, the question still remains why writing should be

[5] The most serious problem with new Melanie McMahon's book about writing lies in its complete neglect of this beneficent dimension of writing, as it reduces writing exclusively to an instrument of violence, terror, and colonization. Throughout the entire book, the association of literature with beauty appears only once, if at all (2023: 107).

in any way related to violence and why it should be accused of that—as Derrida has done in so many ways, whether as an aggressor or a defender. Let us step back and amplify the question we have already asked about the *violence of Writing* mentioned in the title: What does writing have in common with violence, and why?

The Violence of Writing and Metaphysics of Presence

To answer this last question, let us turn to the excerpts from Derrida's work quoted at the beginning, which are disturbing and nevertheless make us reflect on the phenomenon of writing and its relationship to violence more deeply than just at the level of some superficial findings of historical and cultural studies. He has more than once been accused of succumbing to the mania of pure textualism (Foucault, 1979, pp. 26–27)—note his famous assertion, "There is no outside-text" (*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*) (Derrida, 1997, p. 158). It unambiguously links writing to violence, from which, after all, he clearly distances himself. Does he also make a distinction between good and bad writing? What is this violence that Derrida mentions in the fragments quoted above, produced at the level of the originary in the absolute sense, accessible to first philosophy in the form of premonition, for example? Derrida notes that "metaphysics has constituted an exemplary system of defense against the threat of writing." But this metaphysics, since the time of its creation as *ta meta ta physika* (Andronicus of Rhodes), is defined as a place within writing. Therefore, how can metaphysical writing defend itself against the violence of writing as such? And, what is good writing here? Or, to risk an absurdity, which violence is good and which is bad?

Derrida distinguishes different ontological levels of writing, which implies—so we may surmise—a distinction between different levels of violence. The question, however, is what changes in violence when it is situated on the highest floors of the philosophical edifice. There are several options that Derrida does not consider:

1) Does it thereby begin to lose its character as violence as such?
2) Does it become—like *différance*—a more ubiquitous violence, but also a more cunning, hidden, elusive, and unpunishable one? Or
3) does it merely lose its physical character in order to persist as "ideal" violence? Yet, does ideal violence not become even more "demonic" than

empirical violence? Given Derrida's arguments concerning traditional metaphysical categories, one can be certain that all these distinctions would sound to his ears like metaphysical distinctions and, for that very reason, would all be questionable. Or perhaps,

4) there exists a good violence—as has been said—that, for example, is responsible for introducing *justice* into the world and for administering punishment for bad violence? Is this the divine violence referred to in the text by Walter Benjamin discussed by Derrida (1996, pp. 236–252; Derrida, 1992; Kowalska, 2018)?

The history of Western culture shows why writing, especially alphabetic writing, initially popularized as a useful tool for notation—now becoming more and more effectively interiorized through education and the production of a scholastic habitus suffused with grammatical-idealistic melancholy—is radically changing our mindset so that we open up to it and to the "world" as a space for signs that call for infinite interpretation. This subject has been researched widely (McLuhan, 1962; Havelock, 1963; Goody, 1986; Ong, 2002; McMahon, 2023). In the culture of writing, using a special kind of graphopedagogy, everyone is trained *to be*, *speak*, and *think* in line with the ontology of writing. Only the person who is, speaks, and thinks according to the dictates of writing, can be regarded as a human being—an educated human being, understood as *homo literatus*. Besides, "there is only one education" (*es gibt nur* eine *Bildung*) (Mann, 1952, p. 655; translation mine): having authority and/or being subordinated to Writing turns out to be a criterion of humanity. We certainly sense in this pervasive violence that subordinates every fibre of our being to a certain technique, which is blown up to monstrous proportions. This is, one might say, the triumph of Being as a technical device, an apparatus mentioned by Heidegger (1977, pp. 3–33) and Flusser (2000, pp. 21–32).

But is this hypothesis not too one-sided again and too far-fetched? Does it not just apply to the historical moment in which the West finds itself now, which has submitted to alphabetic writing, producing two utterly different consequences? On the one hand, by popularizing and strengthening the violent potential of the ontology of writing, European culture produced science and technology which, as a consequence, led to the creation of various instruments of violence that have enshrouded planet Earth—political, economic, social, or technological ones (McMahon, 2023). On the other hand, based on this very ontological phonetic script, the West has produced the most wonderful and, as it were, the most innocent literary and philosophical artefacts, embodying the human dream of peace and a world without violence.[6] The alphabetization of writing has provided humanity with immense possibilities for expressing its experience. On no account can this state of affairs be viewed negatively. And this is precisely what education and its associated ideal of humanist man are about: to assimilate these practices and their works. The consequences of a prolonged and obsessive abuse of a certain technique grounded in an ontology of some kind, which enables and opens something while preventing and closing it, are radically different. In so doing, writing eludes an unequivocal and negative assessment.

The fact that—as is well-known—Derrida distinguishes two categories of writing does not lessen the violence. On the one hand, there is Arche-Writing, which, as *différance*, constitutes the signifying character of all signs. It is the source of all differences that are articulated in language. This writing precedes every language, including the spoken word. On the other hand, there is writing in the ordinary sense of the term, as a certain tool of notation, which was invented long after humans learned to speak (especially alphabetic writing). Since this second type of writing is structurally unthinkable without the first, it is not possible to situate violence in only one form of writing—for example, that associated with *ta meta ta physika*—without thereby accusing Writing in the first sense. According to Derrida, there is no language without violence. Yet, in accordance with the distinction between primary and secondary writing, should we not also distinguish two kinds of violence: the originary violence of language and the secondary violence of a certain type of writing (e.g., "alphabetic")? However, does this distinction between two kinds of writing in the context of violence make any sense at all, given that writing without violence is impossible? Or is it nevertheless possible? If so, the question then becomes the following: does the absence or reduction of violence in some form of writing result from that writing being closer to, or farther from, the originary violence of arche-writing? Would deconstruction, as a mode of writing close to arche-writing itself, be such a way of writing? Deconstruction as justice without violence (Kowalska, 2018)? Or should arche-writing not serve as the criterion for

[6] This is mentioned extensively and embodied by Settembrini in Thomas Mann's The Magic Mountain. Failing to recognize the positive aspects of the dissemination of writing is the greatest shortcoming of McMahon's book (2023).

increasing or decreasing the violence of writing at all? If that is the case, then what else should serve as this criterion? If one were to claim that it is precisely belles-lettres, as the foundation of humanism, that could be indicated as such an instance—one that is somehow capable of freeing itself from the exercise of violence—does it do so because it suspends its reference to the world, because it reduces or brackets all transcendent references to reality?

Is this really the case? If we recall that European philosophy, especially its innermost philosophical element—metaphysics, but also, to some extent, metaphysically-oriented literature—is described as "metaphysics of presence", whose first attributes are, as its opponents would have it, violence and war (Levinas, 1979, p. 21), then in what sense can we still speak of good writing? We are left with literature. Is it not the first and in fact the only reflection on writing as such that has lasted for centuries, leading to the creation of forms of writing that transform the violence virtually present in writing into beauty, virtue, and peace? Note that they achieve that, paying the price of reducing reality and defining themselves as a game of pretence, fictitiousness, and literariness. By relinquishing its claim and desire for presence, literature enters into a non-aggression pact with writing, so that it can "say anything" (Derrida, 1992, pp. 37–38) but allows itself a degree of figurativeness. And was literature so understood not held up in the second half of the twentieth century as an example worthy of emulation by philosophy in order to mitigate its violent attitude to reality and turn the true world into a fable (Nietzsche, 1911, p. 24)? They used to say: let philosophy become literature (Rorty, 2016), let it abandon its claims to the Truth so that we can avoid its violence.

Are such appeals acceptable? One can counter that by saying that they themselves use violence against philosophy under the banner of fighting violence. In other words, they do not see that, unlike in literature, the link between philosophy and writing is arbitrary. Literature is writing, and as *literature* it cannot be anything else. Meanwhile, the historical and cultural fact that philosophy has surrendered to writing does not mean that it is conceivable (like literature) solely as a writing practice. It is likely that philosophy (precisely as a literary practice and therefore as a "book"), in which philosophers-scribes tenaciously transcribe their metaphysics of presence, once *became* a philosophy full of violence, yet violence was not its immanent and essential state. Here, we encounter yet another paradox of writing. The phonetization of writing occurs in parallel with the transformation of philosophy into metaphysics, which in the first place (coincidence?) signifies a chosen place in the order of Aristotle's writings—into metaphysics of presence, being metaphysics as writing. Drawing inspiration from the violent ontology of alphabetic writing, it proclaims, urges, wishes, calls, and dreams of abandoning writing and its violence; it evokes in itself, as Derrida says, a safeguard against the violence of writing, in the name of the living and peaceful presence of voice. Hence, as Derrida would have it, its phonologocentrism, which by means of writing, in writing and for writing, in defense against this violence and running counter to it, surrenders itself to the voice, or vocative mark and the "living word", giving rise to another kind of violence: the violence of proximity, immediacy, presence, fullness, totality, unity, and community. Violence, which reverses the order and becomes the vengeful violence of the word toward writing. However, we boldly claim that it is still the same violence (of writing), only inverted and enriched, which has its origins in the ontology of writing, the same violence, only that it does not remember itself; it is blurred and transformed into resentment. If those philosophers are right who, like Levinas, have recognised the violent consequences of a philosophy under the sign of the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism, does overcoming this metaphysics and leading philosophy toward non-violent thinking necessarily mean a transformation of philosophy into literature and grammatology, which, as a philosophy written in alphabetical script, must after all perpetuate the violent writing patterns—unless it becomes literature? Or, perhaps, there is another way. Perhaps philosophy can abandon its discourse and go beyond alphabetic writing to become, like mathematics, a purely formalistic discourse and, hopefully, conceivable as non-alphabetic script? Being like mathematics—is it a viable alternative for philosophy? A strange alternative it is, since mathematics, as a highly writing-based creation and a tool used in positive sciences, offers a fully deterministic view of the universe, devoid of any form of free human existence.

Derrida noted that a strict distinction between pure phonetic and non-phonetic script is arbitrary,[7] as phonetic script contains many characters that are impossible to verbalize—therefore, seeking non-phonetic script for violence-shy philosophy to use makes no sense. Let us simply stick to writing as is—so, graphologocentrism then. Are there any other options

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[7] McMahon (2023) argues otherwise.

here? In one of his early texts, Derrida confronts the thoroughly Greek and Christian phonologocentrism of the metaphysics of presence, which he believes is most uniquely exemplified by German phenomenology, with the Jewish discourse of Levinas. The latter, he contends, must fall under the charges of logical inconsistency and hermeneutic blindness, which are informed by the logocentric, violence- and presence-oriented metaphysics of Heidegger—but also under the weight of its own phonocentrism and somber silence. The Jewish script of Levinas turns out to be full of violence. A Greco-German is a Jew and a Jew is a Greco-German, the Same is the Other and the Other is the Same (Derrida, 1978, p. 153). Between them is the history of the West as the history of dialectics—struggle, contention, and reciprocal violence. Is this the definitive *factum*, beyond which one cannot go?

Derrida notes that if we abandon the question about the elements of the alternative, we need to look at the difference between them. Instead of searching for writing that would suit philosophy in the form of some Book, we should simply "experience" (this term comes from old metaphysics) Writing as such, which Derrida views as the primary source and principle of unity and difference, i.e., *différance*, word, thought, and being. Metaphysically, Writing as *différance* is a totally violence-based power. The above-mentioned violent ontology of writing, referred to in *Of Grammatology*, is only a product of pure Writing as pure violence. For each discourse is violence, for a few reasons. As we have said, writing relies on the principle of diaeresis, constantly differentiating and contrasting. It is articulation and arbitrariness. It is separation and postponement; externalization. It follows from the said essay and some other writings of Derrida that Writing is synonymous with the economy of violence and war. The violence of Writing follows from its being a trace, which wields authority within the logic of wanting to preserve and the violence dictated by presence. In fact, desire for writing is the reverse side of the desire for presence, as presence wants to delay death. To leave a mark on becoming, as Nietzsche would say, means simply being. Writing has always had one goal: to make one immortal, preserve, protect, make present—something that is no more or is not yet (Domański, 2002). The trace, as Derrida himself admits, operates within a logic of death, disappearance, and mourning (Kopka, 2024).

Conclusion: Other Than Writing?

Can we keep on asking questions if every question here is entangled in the creation and amplification of the violence of writing? If not, what remains but the apocalypse and eschatology that Derrida speaks of, and the deconstruction that heralds them?

We should, perhaps, think about philosophy going beyond discourse and Writing, something that would do justice to a practice other than writing. If not write, then what? In choosing Writing as a principle governing the triunity of being, speech, and thought, Derrida brings the old metaphor of the world seen as a book, writing, or a letter to philosophical heights. Interestingly, although this metaphor was known to the Greeks, who imparted to it a metaphysical dimension, it was Jews who invested it with the appropriate scale and import. Although all the other great monotheistic religions revere their holy books as the living word of God, only Judaism reveres the Book to a degree unknown anywhere else (Jabès, 1990). By merging Greek philosophical tradition with Jewish-Christian thought, the metaphor of the world as a book became the dominant European pattern of thinking, speaking and being (Blumenberg, 1981). An absolute metaphor (Blumenberg, 1960, p. 9), we might say, extending its dominion throughout Western culture. The Derridean catchphrase "end of the book and the beginning of writing" challenges the metaphysics of presence, which gives priority to phonetic writing (thus the book), keeping a distance from it yet affirming the Jewish tradition. Admittedly, within the metaphysical framework the Jew is a Greco-German and a Greco-German is a Jew, but Derrida's decision to highlight the metaphor of writing makes him a staunch ally of the Jewish tradition in the Marrano style (Bielik-Robson, 2022). But if we challenge the sense of the metaphysics of presence and the associated primacy of voice as a metaphysical "book" and the very metaphor of writing, what is left for us in philosophy? If we remain at the level of metaphor—which could be used to depict the most fundamental vision of the philosophical element—do we not endorse a space of conflict (going much further than other conflicts) of metaphors or a media conflict, which are in fact political conflicts? But does the latter not boil down to a conflict of interest? So, again: ideology, violence, and war? Further, does any conflict of metaphors not presuppose the victory of writing—before the battle even begins? For what metaphor would be as robust as the metaphor of writing to compete with it? Perhaps, only a metaphor of the world as theater could be a match. But has theater not been regarded for centuries as a—mostly secondary—form of writing (McMahon, 2023, pp. 108–115)? If, as Ingarden says, theatre is merely the liminal situation of drama (Ingarden, 1970, pp. 219, 10), then theater could even be chosen as a characteristic symptom of the omnipotence and violence of writing. Well, even if we agree that theater is not the same as drama, considering it a metaphor and extending its *logic* to the whole of reality understood as the spectacle of the world (Sobota, 2022), still makes it a product of Writing—a special "scene of writing", perhaps the most spectacular that has ever happened. Owing to the tools it has, the system of Writing makes its opposition the best part of itself.

Before we "loosen up" (Derrida) and give in to the unbounded dominion of Writing, we may accept our role as scribes, writers, readers, before we abandon our bodies and pore over the book, let us dwell, for the last time, on the metaphor itself, which we may have taken to be a tool of writing. For what is a metaphor, understood here as the "last word" of philosophy, as its liminal notion, something ultimate, as an arche-principle that would govern the entire system: Writing and non-Writing?

Obviously, people who use writing will, in the first instance, think of metaphor as a stylistic device. There are many indications that such a metaphor is secondary to the originally metaphorical structure of language as such (Derrida, 1982, pp. 207–270). Language or, as Derrida would have it, Writing, would be thoroughly metaphorical from the very beginning. But we are not interested in a dead metaphor, but a "living" one (Ricoeur, 1975), which will free us from our attachment to the immediate environment, revealing similarities between things that can be totally removed from and alien to each other. It asks a question and tells us to endure it—in so doing, it is responsible for our new cognition and ways of being. It is heterological. Therefore, philosophy, wishing to maintain its status in the current of questionability, which happens to be its element, must never give up the creation and use of metaphors. As it happens, they need not be verbalized—language is a broader concept than speech. Originary, living language is even closer to gesturing or dancing than to speech, even if living. A living metaphor, in this sense, would be *profanation*—that is, the reuse and consumption of the sacred as something that is re-read (from *rileggere*) and separated (Agamben, 2007, p. 75). In order to transcend the power of Writing and, even for a moment, break free from its tyranny, we would need something like *performative* profanation of abstract Writing as that which constitutes the principle of continuous separation, differentiation, and deferment. We dream of turning the sacred ritual of writing, as dividing and separating, into a joyous performance of profanation. Surely, we'd need some new phenomenological reduction here, which transcends the constraints of both grammatical-idealistic philosophy and literature. The aim is to suspend the reference to transcendence and remove the onus of being by profaning the weight (Lat. *gramma*) of Writing (Gk. *gramma*). Only metaphor conceived as carrying, therefore, as defying the force of gravity, can render this movement on stage (which is no longer a "writing stage") and migrate into the "Nietzschean" festivity of performative questioning in the form of, say, body movement, gesture, color, shape, aroma, not to mention narcotic experience. In choosing, for example, dancing as a philosophical (as question-oriented) movement of thinking, speaking, and being, we do not want to persist in conflict, even if metaphorical or medium-oriented (or especially political) and surrender to the violence of Writing and ideological battle, but, disarmed, we invite Writing to perform Dance, which is not war but fun: farce-mystery (J. Grotowski). This is genuine anarchy, hospitality, wild empiricism, which Derrida the Marrano wrote about outside the economy of war, the violence of Writing, the quadrature of the book, the dictatorship of *logos*, outside the archive, but still on the scene of a revisited academy (Sobota, 2025), which is a symbolic place near which the dangers of absolute trust in writing as a privileged means of philosophical communication became apparent (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274B–278B).

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The Shattering of Subjectivity: Reflections on Torture and Human Suffering

Keywords: violence, torture, phenomenology, subjectivity, body, suffering
Słowa kluczowe: przemoc, tortury, fenomenologia, subiektywność, ciało, cierpienie

Abstract

In this article, I undertake an analysis of torture from a phenomenological perspective. In the first part of the paper, I analyze the UN definition of torture. Against this background, I show that the legal understanding of torture relies on vague and undefined concepts of severe pain and suffering. This leads me to a phenomenological investigation into the question: What does the suffering of a tortured person consist of? In the second part, I discuss the shattering of subjectivity as the main source of the victim’s pain. In conclusion, I aim to strengthen the argument against the use of torture.

This article has two key aims. The first is to understand what torture is and how it differs from other forms of violence. This issue will be addressed in the first part, based on an analysis of the legal definition of torture. I will demonstrate that our understanding of torture relies on vague conceptual categories that require broader explication from the perspective of the victim. I will show that it is a mistake to base these definitions on previously undefined concepts of pain and suffering. Secondly, following this intuition, I will employ phenomenological methods to analyze what suffering under torture consists in. Applying phenomenological reduction will allow me to focus on the very mode of experiencing torture by the subject. Following Michael Staudigl's postulate (2012), I will suspend (epoché) psychological, social, and political explanations of violence. Thus, I am not interested here in why torture is still widely used today. Instead, I will show how torture, by violating the intentional structures of the subject, tears apart their subjectivity and their relationship with the world. Torture will be described here in terms of a phenomenologically understood event. I argue that the evil of torture lies in breaking the victim's subjectivity. The descriptive approach will then shift into a normative perspective: it will contribute to strengthening the argument against its use.

Literature Review

Philosophical discussions of torture usually take place from an ethical and political perspective and include debate on the possibility of employing torture. Arguments in favor of allowing torture in certain exceptional circumstances most often appeal to a utilitarian approach (although there are also utilitarian positions opposing the use of torture (Blakeley, 2007; Ginbar, 2008)). These arguments involve creating scenarios in which torturing one guilty person could save the lives and health of a large number of innocent people (Shue, 1978; Dershowitz, 2002; Allhoff, 2005; Steinhoff, 2012). Opponents of this approach usually base their views on deontological ethics, referring to universal moral law and the idea of human dignity (Davis, 2005; Sussman, 2005; Brecher, 2007). Both perspectives, however, omit the experiences of tortured individuals and very often do not consider what torture actually consists in.

This article will contribute to the discussion in at least three ways. First, it will present an analysis of torture from a phenomenological perspective. This approach is used relatively rarely to describe the experience of torture, although there are exceptions. Particularly important for me are the writings of Jean Améry (1966), who develops a kind of auto-phenomenology. Améry was captured while participating in the Belgian resistance during the German occupation in World War II. In prison, he was subjected to repeated torture, which he later described in his memoirs. Another significant point of reference is Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985), in which she examines Amnesty International reports on torture. Although the monograph is not purely phenomenological, it contains many insights close to phenomenological perspectives and terminology. These concern, above all, viewing torture as an experience and examining how it affects the structures of the subject's consciousness. In addition, the research of Jeremy Heuslein (2019) should be mentioned. Even this brief literature review shows that the use of phenomenological methods to describe torture is relatively rare. However, I believe that this method—due to its emphasis on embodiment and subjectivity—constitutes an excellent theoretical framework for the description of torture.

Second, I intend to present torture as an experience that tears apart the subject's sense of self in its many dimensions: the subject's relationship with their own body, their agency, their relations with others, and their ability to participate in the common, intersubjective process of constructing meaning. Similar themes can be found in David Sussman's article (2005), which analyzes torture as forced self-betrayal and deprivation of the victim's will. I intend to expand Sussman's analysis to include other aspects of torture which, in my view, disrupt not only the subject's relationship with their will, but also with their body and the external world. This perspective will allow for a broader description of the suffering to which tortured individuals are subjected. This is important, as contemporary definitions often define torture in terms of the intentional infliction of suffering, yet they do not offer any specification of what this suffering actually consists in. I wish to fill this gap.

Third, I intend to support the argument concerning the impossibility of permitting torture.

What Is Torture?

Torture is usually defined within the framework of legal theory. A key aspect is distinguishing torture from other types of violence. According to the most commonly used definition, presented in the UN *Convention Against Torture* (1984):[1]

[1] Other, less common definitions also focus on inflicting pain and suffering (usually described as severe), without considering what pain or suffering consists of. These can be

> the term "torture" means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.

According to this definition, we can identify some distinctive features of torture. First, it is a deliberate act. While much suffering can be inflicted unconsciously or accidentally, torture is always a planned action. Second, torture always has a purpose beyond the act itself (punishment, obtaining information, humiliating the victim, etc.). In this sense, the tortured person becomes an instrument for achieving a certain end. Third, there is an inherent extremity in the act of torture. Torture is also described as the infliction of severe or extreme pain upon the victim. Another important factor is the placement of torture within an institutional context. The perpetrator of torture is a representative of a larger system of power—most often the state.

These definitions, however, do not adequately distinguish torture from other forms of deliberate violence, including acts that remain socially acceptable, such as standard prison sentences. The main problem I identify is their emphasis on extreme pain and suffering without first defining and specifying these categories. In the literature, I have found only one proposal that refers explicitly to the victim's perspective. According to Robert Cover, "The deliberate infliction of pain in order to destroy the victim's normative world and capacity to create shared realities we call torture" (Cove, 1968, p. 1603).

It seems that torture can be distinguished in two ways: based on a quantitative criterion or a qualitative criterion. In the first case, the emphasis is placed on the particular extremity of the pain or suffering inflicted during torture. Torture employs similar methods to other forms of violence but applies them in a far more radical manner. However, I believe this

found in Tindale (1966), Amnesty International's *Torture*, the Inter-American Convention (1985), and the Tokyo Declaration (1975).

strategy of distinguishing torture is doomed to failure. Pain and suffering are highly subjective categories, extremely difficult to express, let alone compare. Relying on such a criterion also creates the risk that individuals who do not perceive the inflicted pain as severe may not be recognized as victims of torture.

Therefore, torture should rather be understood based on qualitative criteria. In this case, we seek properties that distinguish torture from other forms of violence. Based on the analyzed definition, we can see that these features include the deliberate infliction of pain or suffering and the institutional context. Another significant aspect is recognizing that torture is carried out for a purpose other than merely inflicting pain. Nevertheless, the criteria remain very general. It seems that they do not allow us to distinguish torture from ordinary punishment (for example, imprisonment can also be a source of suffering, occur within state institutions, and constitute a deliberate act aimed at punishment and rehabilitation). Torture is also extremely difficult to define because any attempt at definition must refer to the categories of pain and suffering, which remain extremely hard to articulate, describe, and specify (Sussman, 2005).

This ambiguity of definitions can lead to many abuses by those in power, as clearly demonstrated by the case of the Torture Memos—a set of notes signed by U.S. Assistant Attorney General Jay S. Bybee, leaked in 2004. The document authorized the use of certain violent techniques (including waterboarding, sleep deprivation, and stress positions) within the so-called American "War on Terror." According to this document, these practices did not constitute torture. The authors based their argument on gaps and ambiguities present in the UN Convention, especially concerning the vagueness of the category of "severe pain and suffering." For example, the Torture Memos stated that extreme pain occurs in the case of physical organ damage: "akin to the pain accompanying serious physical injury (…) In the absence of such pain it is obvious that they cannot be said to inflict severe physical pain or suffering" (Bybee & Yoo, 2002, pp. 9–10). Furthermore, suffering was defined as "substantial mental harm of a sustained duration, e.g., harm lasting months or even years after the acts were inflicted upon the prisoner" (Bybee & Yoo, 2002, p. 17).

Torture consists in the deliberate infliction of pain and suffering upon a victim within an institutional framework to achieve a specific purpose other than the act of violence itself. Moreover, the suffering inherent in torture lies in the loss of autonomy, the inability to control one's own body, and the inability to exercise one's will. I argue that these elements lead to the fragmentation of subjectivity. While all forms of violence constitute a violation of our agency, in the case of torture this aspect is taken to the extreme. In permissible forms of punishment (such as imprisonment), the will is indeed restricted (the prisoner cannot leave the building and must obey the rules of the facility), but a certain degree of freedom is preserved. Some forms of protest, appeal, or resistance remain possible. In the case of torture, the victim's will is completely destroyed, fully subordinated to the torturer's actions, and any opposition becomes impossible and meaningless. In this sense, torture is directed at breaking the victim's subjectivity. In the following section, using phenomenological methods, I will attempt to answer the question of how the loss of will constitutes the suffering of the tortured person.

Phenomenology in Relation to Torture

In this subsection, I will focus on a phenomenological analysis of the experience of torture, which I will treat as an event. Torture can be analyzed both as a fact occurring in the world and as an event. These two approaches determine two distinct analytical perspectives. In the first case, the aim is to establish the occurrence of a situation in which one person was tortured by another. This is the study of the phenomenon as an observable fact that can be examined from an objective, third-person perspective. It can be explained by referring to political science or sociology.

The description of torture as an event activates a different, more subjective perspective. Its personal character means that it cannot be analyzed using the logic of cause and effect. Unlike a fact, an event in phenomenology refers to something that happens in the world and is personally experienced by the subject and addressed to them (or—in the case of collective events—to subjects) and no one else (see Romano, 2009, pp. 27–28; Caputo, 1993, p. 270; Filiz, 2024). An event is not simply an everyday situation we encounter. An event happens to me and transforms the meaning I ascribe to my own subjectivity and the world. Therefore, an event has an essential existential and transformative character, reorganizing my horizon of life. It is an opening to a completely new perspective. Events are singular (always experienced slightly differently) and rupturing. They initiate a transformation in the order of the world and are therefore extremely difficult to conceptualize. Events transcend the framework of the previous order (including the linguistic order), yet new frames have not fully developed. Their personal character makes them simultaneously intimate and alien, and therefore difficult to fully grasp.

> The event as such is singular, not a presentable thing. Its happening surprises us, it comes to us in an unforeseeable way, it sometimes invalidates our expectations and changes our usual ways of looking at the world, things and people. It is not something that can be easily conceived and conceptualized. Nevertheless, it is also something we are so familiar with. We face, experience and witness in our lives, and that we also express in different ways in our languages. (Filiz, 2024, p. 3)

The analysis of torture as an event privileges the perspective of the person who has directly experienced torture. The focus here is on the way in which this experience transforms the subject and their relationship to the world. Torture will be described here as an event that brings about a significant reconfiguration (or destruction) in the subject's relation to the external world, to other subjects, to themselves and to their own body. My approach is thus close to Staudigl's phenomenology of violence. The author proposes a methodology based on suspending explanatory judgments and moving toward the question of what torture is as a lived experience of the subject.

Here, the subject will be understood in phenomenological terms as embodied intentionality (Staudigl, 2012, p. 174). The subject is embodied and capable of intentional reference to external reality. Staudigl emphasizes the bidirectionality of the subject's relation to the world (both spheres influence each other), but in his view it is the subject who possesses the capacity for creative reference to objects, active agency in the world, and participation in the intersubjective process of meaning-constitution. Violence is conceived as a phenomenon that happens *in between*: taking place within a certain field created by the perpetrator, the victim, and the Third (e.g., the witness or silent participant in events):

> Rather, in descriptive terms, it states that in violence, our capacity to create meaning and to originally articulate foreign meaning is at stake: this concerns suffered violence, which must be endured in its corporeal power to injure and meaningfully appropriated; it concerns perpetrated violence, in which the reciprocity of intersubjective meaning-making has

> been interrupted or has collapsed; and it concerns witnessed violence, in which the articulation of another's injury becomes the task and responsibility of third parties who are never entirely absent.
>
> (Staudigl, 2012, p. 180)

For Staudigl, violence is always a singular event, that always unfolds between three perspectives, each of which seems to constitute the meaning of the event slightly differently. Experienced violence is constituted as wounding that must be endured and reveals us as vulnerable. Perpetrated violence—wounding—means the violation of the space of shared meaning, as it deprives the other of the possibility of coexisting within the world of meaning. Meanwhile, the position of the witness constitutes violence and the observed wounding as a call to take responsibility.

In torture, the position of the perpetrator is rather obvious: they are above all representatives and embodiments of institutionalized violence. Torture constitutes an extremely radical situation, as here reciprocity is broken not only between the victim and the perpetrator but also between the victim and the invisible system of power. This leads to a significant deepening of the victim's alienation.

The position of the Third, the witness, is much more intriguing. Torture may evoke associations with events taking place without witnesses. Common depictions of torture, such as in films, portray it occurring in dark, squalid cells, far removed from public view. The victim's screams go unheard; the wounds remain unseen. However, this does not mean that the Third is completely absent. Many researchers note that a society which is physically absent becomes an indirect victim of torture. As Naomi Klein points out:[2]

> This is torture's true purpose: to terrorize—not only the people in Guantánamo's cages and Syria's isolation cells but also, and more importantly, the broader community that hears about these abuses. Torture is a machine designed to break the will to resist—the individual prisoner's will and the collective will.
>
> (Klein, 2005)

Torture, as institutional violence, means that the position of the Third is not merely that of a detached observer. In the situation of torture, violence

[2] Naturally, Naomi Klein's writings are not phenomenological in character; however, her reflections largely converge with what Améry demonstrated in his work.

directly aimed at the body under interrogation also indirectly strikes the bodies of the wider community. Fear here becomes one of the key political emotions. The Third becomes aware of the vast reach of the institution capable of torture, which can serve both as a tool of discipline and an impetus for resistance. Nevertheless, torture is a case in which the boundary between the position of the witness and that of the victim becomes somewhat blurred. In the next part, I will focus on the victim's perspective.

Shattered Subjectivity

I believe that the extremity of torture lies precisely in its aim to shatter the victim's subjectivity and agency. I understand the subject in terms of embodied subjectivity, characterized by the capacity for conscious reference to external reality (intentionality of consciousness) as well as co-construction of meaning. I assume that subjectivity is shaped in relation to the external world, which always influences the way the subject constitutes itself. Thus, the subject emerges at the intersection of activity and passivity, of acting and being acted upon, of autonomy and heteronomy. Nevertheless, the capacity for conscious reference to external reality and for self-reference remains crucial for subjectivity. I also assume that embodiment is the condition of possibility for both reference and self-reference.

In the case of torture, the question of meaning and subjectivity appears particularly difficult. Participation in the constitution of meaning seems almost impossible here, while the objectification of the victim perhaps reaches its furthest limit. Research shows that, in the experience of torture, the ability to co-create meaning undergoes radical destruction. Torture violates the very core of intentionality, understood both as the intentionality of consciousness (the directedness of the subject's mental states toward an object) and as intentionality in the sense of the philosophy of language (that concepts possess meaning). In the experience of torture, there is a significant reduction of the active aspects of the victim's subjectivity, which becomes confined to the passive dimension of experience. The subsequent reductions will be described below, with reference to the experiences of tortured individuals. Here, I primarily draw on published memoirs of victims, as well as materials and interviews collected by Amnesty International.

In my analyses, I draw on various kinds of writing, all of which present the first-person perspective of the victim. These include both auto-phenomenological works authored by victims themselves, who consciously apply philosophical theory to their own memories and experiences (most notably Améry and Semprún), as well as statements contained in reports by Amnesty International. Although these two types of sources differ significantly in character—individual, phenomenological reflections on the one hand, and interview records produced by a de facto political organization on the other—restricting the analysis solely to auto-phenomenological testimonies would unduly narrow the range of victims whose voices are acknowledged. It would limit this range to individuals who are highly educated, familiar with the history of philosophy, and who (at least prior to their capture) occupied relatively high social positions. Torture, however, also affects individuals from lower social strata who did not have access to a humanistic education and therefore conceptualize their experiences differently. Including these accounts thus appears necessary in order to capture the phenomenon of torture as broadly as possible.

The Radical Destruction of Autonomy

Torture is an act aimed at the radical breaking of the prisoner's autonomy. While in the case of other forms of violence a certain degree of freedom and capacity for defense remains, in the experience of torture there emerges an overwhelming sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Any resistance seems utterly meaningless, as it can only lead to angering the guard and thereby increasing the likelihood of renewed suffering. The experience of torture is the experience of the absolute power of the Other, who can exercise complete control over the victim's body. I believe this domination is all the stronger because both the perpetrator and the victim are aware of the institutional permission for violence.

The breakdown of autonomy here goes very far, as it concerns not only the restriction of the ability to act and to manage one's own body, but it also affects the inner will. Torture is primarily directed at breaking the will of the victim. While first-order will (I want) is preserved and directed toward the desire for the cessation of pain, second-order will—which determines the values and motivations behind our desires (I want to want)—is subjected to destruction. Existing beliefs, desires, and adopted values lose their significance. What once seemed important and formed the basis of the subject's identity loses meaning in the face of immense suffering. In this context, I will quote the words of Samar, a former prisoner of the Syrian Saydnaya complex, from an interview conducted by Amnesty International. Samar and his fellow prisoners were tortured, among other methods, by being denied food and water.

> [prisoner] only thinks of food, he goes to sleep and wakes up thinking about food, he goes to sleep and wakes up thinking about food. He doesn't even think about his family. He could say "I don't care if they live or die, the most important thing is to survive."
>
> (Amnesty International [AI], 2016)

Pain and fear become the primary motives compelling the victim to obey orders. Even if we can point to examples where torture failed and the victim managed, through sheer force of will, to resist their oppressor (e.g., by refusing to answer questions), those examples are extremely rare.

The Loss of Being-at-Home

The phenomenological tradition describes the human being as entangled in the world, which influences the constitution of their subjectivity. The self is always immersed in the world, thrown into certain meaningful references through which it can give meaning to its existence. Heidegger (1996) described the relationship between human beings and the world using the metaphor of a home: a person inhabits the world, feeling at home in it. Dwelling describes the condition of a person who feels closely connected to the world, who belongs to it, and feels a bond with it. In relation to this category, torture can be described as an event that leads to the loss of one's world-as-home. The external reality becomes alien—it is no longer a space the victim can co-create and co-constitute with other subjects. It is a space of constant threat. Ordinary objects, such as chairs or cutlery, can at any moment become instruments of torture. The other person appears as someone who threatens them, who has absolute power over them. The victim experiences alienation and the loss of a sense of harmonious belonging to their environment. As Améry describes it:

> If from the experience of torture any knowledge at all remains that goes beyond the plain nightmarish, it is that of a great amazement and a foreignness in the world (…) Amazed, the tortured person experienced that in this world there can be the other as absolute sovereign, and sovereignty revealed itself as the power to inflict suffering, and to destroy. (…) Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part at the first blow, but in the end, under torture, fully, will not be regained.
>
> (Améry, 1966, pp. 39–40)

It is also significant that torture takes place within an institutional context and is not merely the act of pathological individuals. The victim is aware that the violence inflicted upon them has been imposed by the very social institutions that, in principle, were supposed to protect their citizens. This intensifies the loss of trust in the world and reinforces the conviction that no help will come—the law enforcement services will not intervene, and family or friends would have to face an immense institutional machine. In victims' accounts, the theme of losing hope often recurs. This is why Améry rightly points out that the experience of torture also destroys trust in society itself, as well as the belief that the Other will extend a helping hand to me in a situation of danger.

One of the key psychological consequences of torture is the loss of trust in others, which persists long after the traumatic experience (Schippert et al., 2025). The victim has experienced an absolute lack of empathy and compassion, which negates the very sense of being-with-Others. The Other appears primarily as a threat, as someone who can hurt them. They are not a partner in co-constituting the meanings of reality but rather a person who can destroy their reality. This deepens the victim's sense of loneliness and alienation.

The Constriction of the Sphere of Transcendence to Immanence

Torture can be described as a radical narrowing of intentionality through the confinement of consciousness to immanent bodily suffering. Under normal conditions, consciousness is oriented toward a vast horizon of meanings, objects, and possibilities that constitute the world as the space of meaning, shared with other subjects. Torture disrupts this structure by forcefully directing all of the subject's attention toward their suffering.

Under the influence of the suffering endured, the external world appears unreal, distant. The sensations become so intense that they absorb the subject's entire attention. This creates a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, the external world appears as radically present because it constitutes a constant threat to the victim. On the other hand, the experience of torture narrows the field of the subject's intentional references to such an extent that, in extreme cases, they are no longer able to think of a world beyond the prison. Thus, torture does not merely inflict physical harm; it restructures consciousness itself, reducing the world to the present moment of pain and depriving the subject of their fundamental openness to the world. As Elaine Scarry comments:

> It is the intense pain that destroys a person's self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe. Intense pain is also language-destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject.
>
> (Scarry, 1985, p. 35)

Similar themes also recur in the recollections of Jacobo Timerman (an Argentine journalist who was captured and tortured between 1977 and 1978). Timerman describes the refusal to think almost as a survival strategy. He emphasizes that in prison, his thoughts constantly revolved around the suffering that still awaited him and his fears for his family. He states that he consciously entered a state of denial: he rejected memories from before his imprisonment, as well as emotions and rational reflections. The memory of moments of freedom was simply too painful and only deepened his suffering (Timerman, 1982, pp. 34–39). In other testimonies, the mechanism of cutting oneself off from the world beyond the cell is not always described as a conscious strategy, yet it remains common.

Naturally, such a narrowing of intentionality also accompanies other forms of suffering not necessarily related to violence (for example, in cases of severe pain experienced by oncology patients). However, in the case of torture, the victim is additionally cut off from the world beyond the prison—contact with reality outside the prison is at the very least severely limited, if not entirely impossible. This further deepens the narrowing of the world to the reality immediately accessible to the victim. Moreover, torture—more than other forms of violence—disrupts the subject's relation to the external world and to other people.

The Breakdown of Language

In the experience of torture, we are dealing not only with the disruption of cognitive intentionality. Linguistic intentionality is also violated, in the sense of a concept's reference to its meaning. Torture is an experience that distorts the usual structure of linguistic reference. Everyday objects cease to signify what they essentially and ordinarily are. The victim begins to perceive them as tools of pain and suffering. For example, the concept of a chair no longer refers to an object used for sitting; it begins to signify an instrument of torture. Such descriptions recur in many victims' testimonies, and these associations often remain long after the traumatic experience. For instance, Samar associated food with pain because "food also means beating" (AI, 2016). Similarly, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (a Kenyan writer imprisoned between 1977 and 1978) describes how white—the color of his cell—began to signify death for him (Thiong'o, 1981, p. 7). General, commonly shared meanings and cultural connotations (for example, the association of white with purity or innocence) cease to function and are replaced by individual, subjective associations.

Torture breaks down language in at least two ways. First, it blurs the shared meanings that exist within a community. This leads to a disruption of the communicative function and limits the possibility of understanding between people for whom the same concept connotes entirely different meanings. Furthermore, Scarry, in her research on torture, showed how intense suffering destroys the very possibility of linguistic expression. Language is reduced to onomatopoeia and cries, which become almost the only form of expressing pain. In extreme cases, this reduction can go even further, leading to the complete collapse of speech. For example, an Amnesty International report records one Syrian prisoner recalling: "I reached a point where I could not scream any more" (2016). This breakdown of expression deepens the sense of alienation, as the victim is no longer able to articulate their own experience.

The Reduction of the Subject to Their Body

Victims often describe how the experience of torture changed their relationship to their own bodies. Most commonly, this concerns prisoners who were subjected to physical injury. However, even in the case of torture that does not involve physical pain (e.g. head shaving, forced public masturbation), suffering remains distinctly embodied. The memories of tortured individuals frequently focus precisely on describing their somatic sensations, which are so intense that they absorb the subject's entire attention, leaving them incapable of rational reflection or emotional engagement with reality. The only affective states they are able to experience are overwhelming fear and pain, which become so powerful that they limit—and sometimes even exclude—the possibility of experiencing any other feelings.

> …you will not answer any questions. Accomplices? Addresses? Meeting places? You hardly hear it. All your life is gathered in a single, limited area of the body, the shoulder joints, and it does not react; for it exhausts itself completely in the expenditure of energy.
>
> (Améry, 1966, p. 32)

> Whoever is overcome by pain through tortures [sic] experiences his body as never before. In self-negation, his flesh becomes a total reality. (...) only in torture does the transformation of the person into flesh become complete. Frail in the face of violence, yelling out in pain, awaiting no help, capable of no resistance, the tortured person is only a body, and nothing else beside that.
>
> (Améry, 1966, p. 33)

> I felt I was becoming a vegetable, casting aside all logical emotions or sensations—fear, hatred, vengeance—for any of these emotions or sensations meant useless wasting energy.
>
> (Timerman 1982, pp. 34–35)

In the experience of torture, there occurs a fragmentation of the various elements of the victim's identity and subjectivity. In everyday life, their emotions, thoughts, cognitive processes, and somatic sensations are more or less harmonious and are an inherent part of the same experience. These aspects are so deeply interconnected that they are difficult to clearly separate. However, the event of torture causes all other spheres—apart from embodied pain and suffering—to be reduced. The subject's consciousness is reduced to bodily suffering. As Scarry comments:

> (What) the process of torture does is to split the human being into two, to make emphatic the ever present but, except in the extremity of sickness and death, only latent distinction between a self and a body, between a "me" and "my body." (…) The goal of the torturer is to make the one, the body, emphatically and crushingly present by destroying it, and to make the other, the voice, absent by destroying it.
>
> (Scarry, 1985, pp. 48–49).

If we describe torture as the reduction of a multilayered subjectivity to the body, it is worth asking: what kind of body are we talking about? The phenomenological tradition has often drawn attention to the dual perspectives through which one views one's own body. The subject has a body, understood as a material and visible object, but also **is** the body: their actions, desires, and emotions are shaped through the body. Husserl (1989, p. 167) described this by using the conceptual distinction in the German language between *Leib* and *Körper*. The former refers to the embodied body, experienced from the first-person perspective as the center of perception and agency. In contrast, *Körper* denotes the materiality and the body as an object, accessible from a third-person perspective. Importantly, in everyday experience these spheres remain inherently interconnected (in *Körperleib*).

I argue that torture is a pathological situation in which the unity between *Leib* and *Körper* is fractured, and the embodied body disappears. In the testimonies of torture survivors, a particular alienation from the body is frequently emphasized: the victim perceives their body as separate from themselves, in some way external. This foreign body also becomes a source of threat, since it is through it that pain is experienced.

> It was in Auxerre, in the city of the Gestapo, under torture, that I became aware of the reality of my body; before that, my body and I were indistinguishable: I *was* my body without knowing it. And it was me. Before the period of interrogations, there was no distance between my soul—my will, desires, abilities—and my body, which was always available and capable of action. In Auxerre, I felt (…) as if I had never had a body, as if I had incarnated into pain, and at the same time discovered my body, its fragility, suffering, and finiteness. I felt my body so intensely that, in

> a way, it became a separate, perhaps autonomous entity—dangerously autonomous—like an Other (…), a being hostile to the idea of myself.
>
> (Semprun, 2012, p. 56)

The victim experiences their body solely as an object, dependent on the will of the torturer. The dominant perception of one's own body is exclusively from the perspective of passivity, rather than agency. The objectification of one's body becomes yet another aspect of the reduction of subjectivity in the experience of torture.

Normative Aspect

In this subsection, I move from ontology to normative and practical issues. I aim to show how phenomenological analysis can support arguments against the legal permissibility of torture. Of course, in contemporary debates there are no arguments in favor of legalizing torture in general: the discussion concerns exclusively exceptional and rare cases in which torture might appear to be the lesser evil.

Arguments for the legalization of torture in exceptional cases usually appeal to consequentialism. Thought experiments are often employed—cases in which the use of torture appears, within the logic of the scenario, to be a rational solution. The most common example is the so-called ticking bomb scenario (Twining & Twining, 1973; Dershowitz, 2002; Bagaric & Clarke, 2007). Here, we are faced with the question of whether we may torture a terrorist in order to extract information that would allow us to locate a hidden bomb and save the lives of innocent citizens. The scenario is often supplemented with additional conditions, such as the absence of any alternative solution (only the terrorist's knowledge can reveal the bomb's location, and evacuation is impossible), or the certainty that the torture will not result in death or permanent damage to health. It is worth emphasizing, however, that even if we agree that in such situations the choice of torture is morally preferable, this does not yet entail agreement with the introduction of legal mechanisms permitting its use. In legal theory, this point of contention is represented on the one hand by Alan Dershowitz (2002) and on the other by Henry Shue (1978). Dershowitz argues that introducing a legal framework for torture would make it possible to subject it to a range of procedures that would limit its actual use. Shue, by contrast, holds that torture, even if in certain situations it is the better option, should remain legally prohibited. He fears that the legalization of torture, even with legal constraints, could encourage authorities to engage in various forms of abuse and manipulation.

The second argument I wish to consider is based on a comparison with killing (Dershowitz, 2002; Bagaric & Clarke, 2007, p. 51). In this case, the starting premise is that torture is morally preferable to killing. According to proponents of this view, torture is morally preferable because of its reversibility (a victim of torture may survive the experience, whereas death is irreversible) and the greater amount of harm involved in killing. One may then argue that killing is, under certain conditions, legally and morally permissible—above all in cases of self-defense and just war. If, in certain exceptional cases, we morally permit the worse act, should we not also permit torture?

Both arguments rely on quantitative calculations and consequentialism. In the first case, the suffering of one person is treated as preferable to the suffering of many. In the second, legally and morally permissible killing seems to generate more suffering and evil than torture, which serves as a premise for permitting the latter. In my view, however, ethical situations cannot be reduced to quantitative calculations. The inclusion of qualitative research is crucial, as it allows us to show what the suffering of the victim actually consists in. It is precisely here that space opens up for phenomenological methods.

The first argument (the ticking bomb scenario) has already been subjected to various forms of criticism (Sussman, 2005; Brecher, 2007; Wisniewski & Emerick, 2009, pp. 16–55). First of all—as I have mentioned—it is insufficient to justify the legal permissibility of torture in exceptional cases. Second, the artificiality of the argument is significant. The described situation must rely on numerous conditions in order to be persuasive: the detainee must be the only available source of information about the planned attack; they must be actively involved in it (the criterion of guilt); they must possess knowledge that is both necessary and sufficient to carry out the attack; and there must be no possibility of using other means (such as evacuating the population from the threatened area or locating the bomb using technology). It therefore seems that this scenario—due to the number of conditions it requires—is in reality highly improbable and detached from actual experience.

The second argument—based on a comparison with killing—appears more interesting. In this case, phenomenology allows us to undermine its premises. First, phenomenology shows that torture is also an irreversible act—it brings about suffering that extends beyond the moment of the actual torture and has lasting consequences for the subject's life. Moreover, torture differs fundamentally from killing, which calls into question the very validity of the analogy. Killing is primarily an attack on another person's life. This is, of course, an evil, but it is an evil fundamentally different from torture. Torture does not attack life; on the contrary, the moment of death would mark the end of torture, and torturers usually aim to keep the victim alive. The evil of torture lies in radical objectification, in which the victim loses dignity and their relation to the world. We can imagine situations in which a victim of murder dies with dignity—for example, in an honest and just fight, resisting an aggressor. In such a case, death may be an expression of agency and personality (for instance, if the victim dies in the name of their values). In the case of torture, this seems impossible, since—as phenomenological analysis has shown—it is based on depriving the victim of personality, agency, integrity, and dignity. From the perspective of torture victims, the suffering is so immense that they would often have preferred death (similar statements recur in memoirs). I do not claim that killing is "better" than torture, but only that the two phenomena are incomparable. Thus, qualitative and phenomenological analyses allow us to rebut this argument.

Conclusion

This work has set itself an extremely ambitious task, one that may even be impossible to fully accomplish. The author remains aware that many issues have only been outlined here and demand further development based on interdisciplinary research combining philosophical, psychological, and legal perspectives. The text is intended primarily to initiate a debate.

In this article, I have aimed to show that our current understanding of the concept of torture remains unclear. We usually think of torture in terms of inflicting extreme pain and suffering on a victim within an institutional context. This is reflected in legal definitions of torture. However, the problem that emerges when analyzing different definitions is the ambiguity surrounding what exactly this extremity entails. How can it be assessed? I believe that clarifying this requires going beyond the legal context and turning to considerations at the intersection of phenomenology and the psychology of pain. According to my thesis, the extremity of torture should be understood not quantitatively but qualitatively. If every form of violence violates the victim's subjectivity, then torture results in a complete shattering of subjectivity. This constitutes the main aim of the torturer. Victims lose their sense of dwelling in the world and of belonging to a broader community; they become alienated from the world and their own bodies, and their capacity for relating to external reality becomes restricted.

Such a description of the experience of torture can form the basis for normative analysis. Above all, it makes it possible to show the significant qualitative difference between torture and other forms of violence that are considered permissible under certain conditions (e.g., regular punishment). Torture cannot be considered comparable to commonly accepted and legal practices.

I believe that torture is indeed the most extreme form of violence, one that cannot be justified under any circumstances. By shattering subjectivity, torture in fact enables the reduction of a person to an object, striking at the very core of humanity. The victim is subjected to radical instrumentalization, deprived of will and autonomy even at the most basic level. They undergo complete disintegration, which causes suffering that goes beyond the enormity of the physical pain inflicted. Furthermore, I believe that this reduction also affects, to some extent, the torturer, who likewise risks becoming merely an instrument in the hands of a system that transcends individual agency. Their responsibility becomes blurred, especially given that they often have limited options to refuse participation in acts of violence.

The use of torture also causes society to perceive the radical objectification of a person as an acceptable possibility within key institutional bodies. Torture shows that institutions that were supposed to protect their members do not fulfill this function and instead become a threat. Moreover, rather than fostering moral education, they shape individuals inclined toward violence, as they demonstrate that radical objectification of another person can be permitted under certain conditions and within certain spaces. For this reason, torture carries dangers not only for the individual but also for society as a whole. It undermines social relations. As shown, a victim whose subjectivity has disintegrated possesses a limited capacity to participate in the shared construction and expression of meaning. Therefore, torture constitutes a radical negation of the ideals of community and co-responsibility.

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The Phenomenon of Violence Against Queer People in Putin's Russia

Keywords: queer phenomenology, homophobia, the body, Russia, Ukraine, Putin

Słowa kluczowe: fenomenologia queer, homofobia, ciało, Rosja, Ukraina, Putin

Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of violence against queer people in Russia under Vladimir Putin's rule. When analyzing queerphobia, I draw on the methodology of Sara Ahmed, author of *Queer Phenomenology* (2006). In the article, I explore the issue of violence against gay men, who have become the primary target of widespread attacks by Putinist propaganda and Russian public institutions. I focus on the mindset of those who initiated the homophobic witch hunt. The queer body has become the target of institutional violence, with the aggressors fixating on the physicality, sexuality, and physiology of queer individuals. Queer people are subjected to torture aimed at the ritual mutilation of their genitals. In this article, I also analyze the next stage of Putin-era queerphobia, which began with the outbreak of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Introduction

This article explores the issue of violence against queer communities in Vladimir Putin's Russia. The manifestation of violence against queer people is most conspicuous in homophobia. It is important to emphasize that homophobia is a form of violence which has deep roots in tradition. This issue has become politically entangled, and homophobic violence is sometimes dismissed as an intellectual fad (Wickberg, 2000, pp. 42–57). From a phenomenological point of view, I would like to place emphasis on the following problem: homophobia is saturated with violence, and it is driven by clan-based aggression directed toward otherness. This type of violence is most often revealed in cultures dominated by religion and in very traditional communities. However, we will not understand hatred of queer people if we focus solely on religion. After all, many religious believers today accept queer people. Therefore, inspired by Freud's findings, it is more accurate to say that homophobia is as elusive as taboo. Violence often stems from prohibitions and commands of an unknown origin, and taboo itself is a kind of elusive authority. In Freud's words, violence is the domain of taboo (Freud, 1919, pp. 100–104). Following Michael Staudigl's ideas in his essay *Entwurf einer Phänomenologie der Gewalt*, we can posit that homophobia is a form of violence reinforced by the community, whereas violence itself is always an individual act. Aggression and injury are individual phenomena. Psychological and physical injury are intimate experiences specific to each person (Staudigl, 2012, pp. 180–182).

Homophobia and its manifestations, such as verbal and physical harm, can occur unexpectedly and lead to extreme hatred and even death. Numerous studies have shown that homophobia is an extreme form of violence (Meyer, 2015, pp. 42–43). It is difficult to consider this a manifestation of political or ideological hysteria. This raises the question: What is homophobia? The easiest way to answer this question is to examine specific examples. Concentration camps in Chechnya and the organized hunting of gay men by paramilitaries in Russia are dire instances of homophobic violence. Accounts from victims and witnesses illustrate the drive to eliminate the "hated queer body" (Lokshina, 2023).

In order to explore the phenomenon of Russian and specifically Putinist violence against queer people, I draw upon the research methodology of Sara Ahmed. In the introduction to her 2006 book *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed puts forward the argument for the application of phenomenology in queer studies as follows: "Phenomenology can offer a resource for queer studies insofar as it emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 2). Queer people experience and perceive their bodies differently due to the violence they endure. From a humanistic perspective, this is not an exaggeration of the homophobia problem, given that this aggression takes the form of physical violence against non-heteronormative bodies. The aggressor decides to attack because they do not accept that queer people could make decisions about their own bodies. Such fury and aggression are almost exclusively directed at queer people's bodies. When examining various manifestations of violence, phenomenology should also address the experience of sexual physicality and gender expression.

The aggressor restricts the queer person's body through a whole spectrum of prohibitions and commands. This article discusses the phenomenon of violence against gay men in Putin's Russia. Due to the patriarchy and exclusionary mentality dominating the country today, men have become the sole, or almost sole, targets of violence. The obsessive hatred and fixation of persecutors on the gay body is worth examining, as it has become the object of ritual mutilation by homophobes. Mary Douglas aptly recognized that the body symbolizes a given society. The violence and wounds inflicted on victims mirrors the obsessions that exist in society (Douglas, 2001, pp. 114–115). Homophobic violence in Russia has become widespread and is an everyday experience for queer people during Putin's rule. Their everyday life involves encountering various threats.

In patriarchal and traditional societies, queerphobic hatred is predominantly directed toward men who engage in sexual and romantic relationships with other men. For this reason, I focus my attention on violence against non-heteronormative men. In patriarchal cultures, erotic and romantic relationships between women are not taken seriously; for example, in early Russian society, the clergy punished women less severely because the hymen was supposedly not broken during lesbian sex. This crude reductionism treats the body as a purely physical object that can be subjected to macroscopic examination and evaluation. From a phenomenological perspective, one could argue that sex between men is viewed as purely physical and demonstrative, a "spectacular phenomenon" due to human culture's emphasis on visualization and perception. This perception stirs the aggressor's imagination when encountering otherness or strangeness. In the aggressor's eyes, sex must be visualized in order to ignite the imagination, making violence equally spectacular. In this paper, I will examine the issue of violence against queer men in Putin-era Russia and seek to identify the causes of this violence. Is there a factor or phenomenon responsible for it? What determines aggression and hatred?

The Phenomenon of Narrative Violence: Tradition

I referred to tradition earlier, and for the following reason. Let us examine the phenomenon of homophobia from the perspective of the absolutization of tradition. In Russia, this has become a vehicle for phobias directed toward sexual and romantic minorities. During the Putin era, various notions of an all-encompassing, normative tradition have emerged, defining what is bodily and sexual, and setting the standard for what is considered normal. It is worth recalling Edmund Husserl's reflections on the essence of tradition at this point. Husserl was not interested in learning about tradition. He argued that tradition is lived; he refers to "being-in-the-tradition" (*Stehen-in-der-Tradition*), which emerges through community (Husserl, 2006, p. 437). The strength of tradition's influence is determined by the experience of tradition itself. Tradition, as the process of *tradere*—that is, transmission—influences the human ego that constitutes the community here and now. It is also an accumulation of past egos as a heritage of meanings—*Sinneserbschaft*. This was Husserl's view, but it is worth adding that, according to Freud, love forms bonds within communities and simultaneously becomes directed toward the group's leader, undoubtedly reinforcing authoritarianism (Freud, 1922, p. 66).

What is tradition, and how does it lead to pressure and violence on a grand scale? According to Freud, tradition and taboo are linked by the fact that they exude an aura of some nameless, overbearing authority. This authority is associated with the father's presence within the community, particularly the family, where he imposes his will and instills widespread fear. Tradition, which has strong religious connotations, is formed by commandments, prohibitions, sacred principles, values, rituals, and certain ritualized activities, among other things. Together, these exert pressure and coercion, generating violence. Given that human sexuality has historically been subject to intense taboo, the violence associated with enforcing rules, regulations, prohibitions, and other restrictions relating to sex and reproduction is correspondingly intense. Husserl overlooks this aspect in his works because he believes that there is no subject without a community and that the individual must submit to the community's will to a significant extent. However, I am interested in how tradition has led to the accumulation of ideas about human sexuality and its purpose. I am essentially concerned with the cult of fertility because, in various traditionalist systems, the body must be capable of reproduction and of bringing new life into the world in order to be recognized by the community as valuable and necessary.

The imperative to procreate exerts as powerful an influence on members of a community as the prohibitions against killing one's own kind. It is therefore fitting that, in *The Phenomenological Mind*, Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi mention birth and death alongside sexuality (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012, p. 149). This imperative has become an inherent part of tradition and, to apply Husserl's terminology, it is among the deepest and heaviest sediments at the bottom of tradition. This has concrete consequences for the individual. Those who oppose the imperatives of tradition are mutilated and killed.

According to Husserl's theory, the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) is constituted by tradition, along with history and language, among other things. Tradition also gradually builds up the sedimented meanings of the homeworld (*Heimwelt*). As I mentioned earlier, the traditional world is based on the oppressive demand to subjugate the individual through constant confrontation with the *Fremdwelt*. Building on these ideas, one might propose the following thesis: in the realm of sexuality, the figure of the "alien" is the queer community, which has most often been associated with homosexuality throughout history. What is the root cause of the aggression toward queer people, particularly men? I believe the source of violence against gay men lies in patriarchal and traditionalist expectations that their bodies belong to the community. In other words, their bodies must be capable of impregnating women to sustain the life of the entire community, ensuring its strength and continuity. The male body must produce sperm to fertilize a woman. In this sense, homosexuality and same-sex intercourse can be seen as threats to the entire community. In this context, the queer body—that of the Other—belongs to the *Fremdwelt*.

The Russian-Putinist Quest for Tradition

The Putin era is an example of the restoration of a patriarchal model of supremacy. This process is linked to the resurgence of nationalism, which is shaped by religion and the trope of the "rotten West" found in Russian culture. In Putin's reductive traditionalism, the world is divided into good (Russia) and evil (the West). This corresponds to the belief that Russians are faithful to tradition and cherish traditional heterosexuality, while those oriented toward the West are depraved.

During the Putin era, this model of traditional physicality and sexuality has been reconstructed in a more extreme form, with clear boundaries and a strict definition of what constitutes tradition and Russian identity. As I mentioned above, the essence of this identity is primitive and based on a cult of reproduction. According to this schema, heterosexuality is the body that bears children, while the queer body is regarded as reproductively barren and perverse. The Russian and Putinist concept of "traditional sexual relations" had its origins in the early years of Putin's presidency (i.e., between 2000 and 2008). While the Russian head of state did not take a clearly homophobic stance at that time, there was already growing hostility in the State Duma and an obsession with homosexuality and gender nonconformity was beginning to emerge. This obsession would lead to an intention to harm queer people.[1]

Over the years, religious traditionalism and conservatism began to revive, along with the emergence of anti-Western resentment. The brutalization of social life was accompanied by an increasingly intense search for an enemy. Europe came to be demonized in the public sphere and has contemptuously been referred to as "Gayrope" (Riabova, 2015, pp. 89–90). This narrative was somewhat abstract at first, but the violence eventually became directed at specific individuals. As Heinrich Popitz wrote in *Phänomene der Macht*, violence is the deliberate physical harm of others, with the subject always at the center (Popitz, 1992, pp. 48–49). Violence against strangers is never merely abstract; it is enacted upon concrete bodies. This violence serves

[1] Following the dissolution of the USSR, the limited freedom enjoyed by queer people in Russia came to an end with the end of the Boris Yeltsin era. Yeltsin had ordered the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993. Russia's economic crisis and the failure of liberal rule discredited the idea of freedom.

an educational purpose and must be spectacular. Drawing on Popitz's ideas, this can be applied to queer people. Those perceived as different are subject to different treatment; violence against them must usually be justified by proving that they possess certain alien and dangerous characteristics and defects that are dysfunctional for the community. The history of homophobia and its various manifestations is very long and contains many examples of brutality. Inspired by Merleau-Ponty's perspective, one could argue that violence against sexual minorities is more visible than fluctuations between violence and acceptance (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 109). This can be applied to the queer experience. A constant feature is aggression directed against sexual difference and gender identity. In this context, Judith Butler's observation that violence against queer people is widespread yet difficult to expose and prove is particularly pertinent: "It was difficult to bring this violence into view precisely because gender was so taken for granted at the same time that it was violently policed" (Butler, 1999, p. xix). This violence is often hidden away in people's homes, away from any witnesses. Butler mentions accounts she cites of young gay men who were forced to leave their family homes because of their sexuality.

In *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*, Bernard Waldenfels stated that violence, as an outside intrusion, is always addressed. The body is the primary space in which violence can occur. However, physical injury can be preceded by a narrative that legitimizes violence, which prefigures bodily injury (Waldenfels, 2002, pp. 149–150). Violence against queer people often begins with intentional verbal abuse. For example, in early 2002, a homophobic anti-pedophile narrative emerged in Russia. The alleged protection of children was used to justify violence against homosexuals, who were equated with pedophiles. This association was not new; throughout history, gay men have often been equated with pederasts—pedophiles who "hunted" ephebes out of frustration, much like the protagonist of Sartre's *Nausea* (Sartre, 2007, pp. 163–169).

Equating male homosexuality with pedophilia is intended to create an association between homosexuality and a repulsive crime against the innocent. From a phenomenological perspective, it is important to note that, in the eyes of homophobes, gay men are criminals who prey on children. In Russia, the belief inherited from the Soviet era is that homosexuality is punishable by exile to a labor camp, and that homosexuals constitute the worst and most depraved category of prisoners. In this context, it should be recalled that State Duma deputy Svetlana Goracheva started a campaign in defense of so-called Russian morality. She proposed raising the age of consent for sexual relations. According to the biased opinions commissioned by the author, starting sexual activity too early poses a risk of developing pathologies such as sadism, a tendency toward rape, pedophilia, and homosexuality (Goracheva, 2002, p. 5).[2] In Russia, the Orthodox tradition has become intertwined with the "Soviet tradition," both of which have, to adopt Husserl's terminology, left a "lasting sediment" in the culture. This has resulted in an unusual combination of different types of homophobias. For instance, some deputies from the party led by Vladimir Zhirinovsky and the Communists suggested recriminalizing male homosexuality, i.e., restoring the provision from the Stalinist Criminal Code of 1934 (lesbians were not punished). It is worth noting that in 1934, Article 121 of the Criminal Code reverted to the Old Russian term for sexual contact between men, "muzhelozhstvo." The wording of the statute explicitly framed the gay male body through the image of one man lying with another.

Over the years, queer people in Putin's Russia have been subjected to widespread attacks in the Kremlin-controlled media. They have been portrayed as enemies of traditional, Orthodox Russia. LGBT+ people have become synonymous with depravity, and queer intimacy has been reduced to a matter of repulsive physiology. Putin's media organizations and journalists became obsessed with documenting the physical aspects of same-sex sexual contact. The queer body has become a political and ideological issue for the state.

The bodies, physiology, and bodily fluids of queer people have been the subject of intense stigmatization. The narrative of violence has involved an attempt to disgust people with the most minute details of queer bodily fluids. On the Rossiia-1 channel, Putin's propagandist Dmitry Kiselev argued that the ban on gay propaganda should be extended. He declared on television that gay people should be banned from donating blood and sperm. Furthermore, he stated that in the event of a car accident, the hearts of gay people should be burned so that they cannot prolong anyone's life (Clover, 2022, p. 316). In the eyes of the propagandist, the queer body is not only

[2] Eminent sociologist and sexologist Igor Kon was excluded from the consultations because his research was based on reliable scientific knowledge devoid of biased and moralising assumptions.

dangerous and toxic, but, above all, unproductive in the context of traditionalist ideology, as it does not produce offspring. Thus, in this dehumanizing narrative, such a body is nothing more than a useless object. To put it another way, in Levinas's terms, it is merely a hostile category rather than a subject with a face.

Kiselev revealed a traditionalist obsession with reproducing "pure" life, which is in keeping with the spirit of tradition. In Putin's Russia, the idea that queer people are causing a demographic collapse is repeated like a mantra. This phobia ignores the fact that no sexual orientation is associated with infertility. In many countries, queer people have children, thanks to friendly relationships between gay men and lesbians, among other things. As Ahmed explains in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, sexual orientation relates to reproduction only if two people wish to form an intimate relationship (Ahmed, 2014, p. 145). A queer body can give birth or impregnate. These decisions are usually made consciously and lead to a mature approach to parenting. In the homophobic narrative of the Putin era, only heterosexual marriage and having children within such a marriage are considered acceptable and legal. As Michel Foucault aptly observed when analyzing the Victorian mindset, only formally monogamous couples who have children are entitled to rights and privileges—in other words, the "legitimate and procreative couple" (Foucault, 1990, p. 3). Violence is used as a punishment for failing to fulfill the duty to procreate.

One of the phenomena of violence against queer people in Russia is the undermining of their identity and dignity, as well as the propagation of the myth that homosexuality is contagious. This body is infectious and contaminates the nation's pure blood. For this reason, it spreads the germ of barrenness. Queer people can easily be stripped of their dignity by aggressively promoting the idea that sexual orientation is invented, inauthentic, frivolous, and a passing fad. As Ahmed reminds us, we live in a culture where heterosexuality is axiologically neutral. The term "sexual orientation" is no longer neutral, as it implies homosexuality or weirdness. Therefore, the implication is that the whole world is heterosexual (Ahmed, 2006, p. 67). Even the mildest homophobic text might sound like this: "Maybe you think you're not heterosexual?" According to Ahmed, this constitutes the first degree of narrative violence, which begins when one leaves one's comfort zone due to the dominance of heteronormativity (Ahmed, 2014, p. 152). This dominance of a single paradigm stems from a tradition that imposes rules and prohibitions on sexual behavior and, as Katrina Roen observes, reinforces the binary division between masculinity and femininity by invoking the authority of medical science (Roen, 2005, pp. 270–271). And yet the queer community shows that, while confining oneself to binary frameworks may perpetuate social oppression, it does not facilitate self-expression. After all, how can femininity and masculinity be defined when science proves that, at a certain stage of "fetal development" and even after birth, characteristics of sexual dimorphism may be unclear?

The second level of queerphobia is more hazardous, and the narrative I am referring to is that of the pathologization of being queer. It has been argued by proponents of homophobia that non-heterosexual orientation could be treated as a contagious disease that should be cured. This myth has often led to harmful and even deadly therapies, with suicide being the most common consequence of the intensification of self-hatred. In the 21st century, this issue remains highly relevant in many regions of the world.

In homophobic discourse, even geographical space is imbued with a sexual dimension. Ahmed provocatively argues that space is considered sexual regardless of sexual orientation because a person begins to desire someone in a specific space (Ahmed, 2006, p. 1). For obvious biological reasons, this space is conditioned by heterosexual individuals. American sexologist Anne Fausto-Sterling has emphasized the significance of space in shaping gender norms, which can be influenced by spaces of various sizes, ranging from countries and cultures to the subcultures of gay bars. For instance, a gay man dressed in stereotypically feminine attire may be subjected to violence in a homophobic society, but receive compliments in a queer bar. Fausto-Sterling therefore concludes that our identities are constructed depending on our surroundings (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 244).

Encounter and confrontation create an experience that inhabits the body; especially when the body feels a desire that does not conform to the norms set by tradition. As Edmund Husserl argued, every perceiving consciousness is embodied consciousness (Husserl, 1931, p. 127). Reflecting on this idea, we might conclude that our sexuality, as a physical phenomenon, plays a significant role in shaping our consciousness, our experience of the world and our decisions, both spontaneous and deliberate. As humans, we cannot free ourselves from thoughts about the body. According to phenomenologists, there is no space in which objects exist independently. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty explained, it is the body that provides our central perspective

(Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 57). When he wrote that our sexuality cannot in any way be separated from the way our bodies experience the world, Merleau-Ponty was drawing on Freud's ideas (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 183). The body functions within a certain space on a daily basis. More precisely, it is constrained by certain objective obstacles within that space. Extending this idea to the experience of queerness, we can see that desire, as a bodily experience, encounters obstacles in the form of traditional commands and prohibitions enforced by those who adhere to tradition. In other words, the obstacles to the fulfillment of desire are encountered in the everyday bodily experience of a queer person. As noted by Lisabeth During and Terry Fealy, a phenomenology that incorporates gay and lesbian theories must closely examine the everyday experiences of homosexual persons, their place in the world and their relationships with others (During, Fealy, 1997, p. 121). Particular attention should be paid to the issues that queer individuals face in their daily lives.

In this context, let us once again consider Husserl's thoughts on tradition. I would argue that this is of significant importance when it comes to the experience of being queer in the world. When a person discovers that their body gives off signals and signs that clash with the expectations of a tradition-based culture, they experience a moment of tragic tension and self-directed violence. Tradition expects strict adherence to permanent rules, while consciousness, permeated by these traditions, must also heed the body. The individual's desires struggle against the ego-shaped consciousness that forms the community, as well as what Husserl termed the "historical ego" of all previous generations.

Bearing in mind the above reflections, let us now focus our attention on the case of Putin's homophobia discussed in this paper. In homophobic Russian narratives, queerness is depicted as a foreign phenomenon, supposedly characteristic of the West, as a culture hostile to tradition. Russian conservatives initiated the construction of a narrative that purports to demonstrate the moral purity of Orthodox Russia and its commitment to the cultivation of traditional values. The Orthodox East was expected to be free from impure, infertile (barren) queer bodies. The Russian Orthodox Church also engages in practices that can be interpreted as symbolic violence, including the act of cleansing the ground (with water) where queer persons have walked. For instance, in 2005 the missionary department issued a statement that it would cleanse the streets with holy water after the pride parade (Corvin, 2005).

Homophobic narratives often feature the idea that the number of queer people is increasing rapidly. These people are portrayed as a threat to tradition, particularly to the traditional model of heterosexual relationships. This myth of uncontrolled growth in the number of homosexuals is further reinforced by the belief that a heterosexual person can be turned gay. In other words, it is as if homosexuality were the result of random social factors and the transition from one sexual orientation to another were a mere whim. A pseudo-scientific book published in 2003, *Gays and Lesbians*, gained widespread publicity. The author, Dilia Enikeeva, a psychiatrist and sexologist, argued that only one in a hundred Russian gays and lesbians could be considered "true homosexuals." These self-professed homosexuals then proceed to entice heterosexuals into the same sexual orientation. The underlying reasons for this pattern of behavior remain to be elucidated. Enikeeva's argument posits that individuals' inclination toward homosexuality is driven by a desire to advance their professional careers, a psychological immaturity, a tendency to be dominated by influential figures, and the susceptibility to seduction. As a point of reference, it is important to note that, following Goracheva, Enikeeva proceeded to examine the alleged interdependence between homosexuality and pedophilia. In order to protect the "purity" of heterosexual orientation, Enikeeva proposed raising the age of consent for sexual activity to 18. In Enikeeva's opinion, members of the LGBTQ+ community are responsible for the infection of mentally healthy heterosexual individuals. Although Enikeeva was unable to identify the medical cause of the increase in homosexuality, she did suggest that it may be due to some kind of pathological mutation (Enikeeva, 2003, pp. 106–109, 233–237). Enikeeva's analysis identified gay men as the primary reason for the demographic calamity. In accordance with the Bolshevik "homophobic tradition," Enikeeva's research focused on homosexual men. The idea that homosexual bodies were presented as an expansive factor of depravity that was spreading in the West was put forward. The necessity to halt this incursion was a recurring theme in the discourse of the Duma, where deliberations on the matter were a regular occurrence. Rather than being curtailed through educational initiatives or persuasive discourse, the propagation of queerness was to be stopped through the use of psychological and, ultimately, physical violence. The anti-queer traditional narrative was marked by the stigmatization of romantic minorities and the portrayal of queer people as sexually deviant, necessitating treatment.

The Cult of Heterosexual Masculinity

Over time, the Kremlin leader began to openly show his support for the Orthodox Church, giving the green light to the large-scale construction of a state ideology of traditionalism with an official cult of heteronormative masculinity at its core. In this context, the tenets of the dominant religion have reinforced anti-gay rhetoric, particularly within Russia's patriarchal culture. Let me draw your attention to a significant fact: in 2013, homophobia in Russia was enshrined in law. State Duma deputies tried to convince everyone that their goal was to defend traditional values and children from so-called homosexual propaganda. Since Putin's third term began in 2012, Russia has been waging a cultural war in defense of these values. Putin has consolidated his power by offering Russians, orphaned after the dissolution of the USSR, the prospect of expanding Russia's military might and sphere of dominance, as well as positioning Russia as the center of global conservatism. In this respect, Russia aspires to be the guardian of tradition. This is in opposition to the "morally corrupt" West, which, according to Putin and the Orthodox Church's propagandists, has become a breeding ground for counter-values, decadence, nihilism, gender confusion, and the "promotion" of sexual deviance. Since then, Russia has legislated to define which sexual relations are and are not traditional (Sheller-Boltz, 2017, pp. 72–73). Same-sex intimacy has officially been declared non-traditional (i.e., in Russia). The idea of defining which sexual relations are traditional is grotesque and absurd in itself. The legislator has decided to take an interest in the physicality and sexuality of its citizens. This legislative absurdity was fully endorsed by Putin and Patriarch Kirill. Such a hateful narrative has found fertile ground in a brutalized social life. Drawing on Husserl's ideas, I have shown above the significance of tradition in forming prejudices based on binary patterns and schemas.

Traditionalism implies a cult of patriarchy and brutal masculine ideals, fueling hatred toward non-heteronormative people. Tradition presents a binary division of the world between the strong man and the weak woman, with gay men being associated with a blurring of gender traits and portrayed as effeminate. A common feature of homophobic narratives is the attribution of masculine traits to lesbians and feminine traits to gay men. This is intended to disparage individuals who supposedly exhibit a mixture of biological dimorphism and socially gender-typical behavior patterns. Before queer bodies became the target of Putin's violent campaign, a propaganda attack was launched to promote the idea of masculinity. Russian men were expected to embody the antithesis of Conchita Wurst, whom Putin's propagandists portrayed as a symbol of Europe—a continent derisively termed "Gayrope" by the aggressors. The aggressors fixated on Conchita's beard, viewing it as a harbinger of the imminent end of "Gayrope" (Cassiday, 2023, pp. 100–101). At the same time, the model of masculine Putin was promoted relentlessly. The president displayed his physical strength in the media by riding a horse bare-chested, being gallant toward women and brutal toward men. He constantly emphasized his role as the alpha male, hunting down his enemies (including Khodorkovsky and Nemtsov). In Freudian terms, one could argue that the image of Putin is a typical tribal portrayal of the dominant father figure who imposes his will on his family—or, in other words, a small, traditional community. His masculinity and libido are—in propagandist eyes—beyond question. Male family members are expected to embody the same qualities as the father: machismo, brutality, and self-assurance. At the opposite end of the spectrum were metrosexual, supposedly effeminate men who were "imports" from the West. The "Russian macho" despised "soft queers." Russian public television entertainment programs ridiculed gay men as people who only pretended to be men. The queer male body and its manner of movement were supposedly comical imitations of real, masculine Russian machos. Russian macho ideology aimed to devalue the physicality of queer people. According to this hateful narrative, only heterosexual men and cisgender women possess the bodies of "true men" and "true women," as defined by the Italian fascist thinker Julius Evola's concept of the "absolute man" and "absolute woman." Simone de Beauvoir offered an interesting commentary on the views of extreme traditionalists, stating that the man is the subject and the absolute, while the woman is simply different (de Beauvoir, 1956, pp. 15–16). In patriarchal traditionalism, a leader's brutality and rudeness not only raise no objections, but actually strengthen his position and authority.

In this context, Elizabeth Wood analyzed Putin's political image, which is based on two contrasting elements: the traditional, patriarchal "muzhik" and the contemporary pop star (Wood, 2016, pp. 329–350). Putin's physical prowess was on display, as was his penchant for crude, physiological jokes. When he wanted to publicly humiliate his opponents, such as journalists, he would suggest castration or hanging by one testicle (Petersson, 2021, p. 68). In 2004, a song in Putin's honor, "Takogo kak Putin," was written and performed by young women. The song has little artistic merit and presents a very stereotypical image of women admiring Putin (Sperling, 2015, pp. 39–47). This primitive cult of the heterosexual Russian male body had a vulgar, almost pornographic dimension. It is precisely this glorification of Putin's body and its vulgarity that accompanied the persecution of homosexual men, whose bodies were ritually mutilated.

The cult of heterosexual masculinity and homophobia has unleashed immense hatred and violence against queer people. One victim was Vladislav, a young Russian man whose body was subjected to brutal torture.[3] He was the victim of ritualistic, homophobic violence: his head was smashed with a paving stone and his genitals crushed. The final act of humiliation was brutally shoving a beer bottle into his anus. This incident occurred a few months after the Duma passed the so-called anti-gay law. When questioned, the attackers made no secret of the fact that they were punishing him for his non-traditional sexual orientation (Kirilenko, 2013). Vladislav's family emphatically stated that he was not homosexual and expressed their outrage that Elton John had dedicated his concert to the murdered boy. Nevertheless, this does not alter the fact that the murderers confessed that they tortured Vladislav under the impression that he was homosexual. Vladislav's sexuality was shrouded in secrecy due to a sense of shame. In the context of queer phenomenology, the topic of shame must be highlighted. Like taboos and tradition in general, shame is elusive. Referring once again to Husserl's reflections, one might argue that the sense of shame is a heavy residue that the individual inherits from participating in culture. It is a mixture of feelings, including panic, disgust, aggression, and opportunism, where the community and its feelings and judgements take precedence over the individual. Vladislav's parents were ashamed that their son had been murdered because of homophobia. Many

[3] On the night of 9 May 2013, during the Victory Day holiday in Volgograd, tragedy struck. Vladislav Tornovoi, aged 23, and his friends were enjoying a beer near the block of flats where he lived with his grandmother. His friends accused him of being gay. The following morning, his grandmother began searching for him. He was found dead in the courtyard.

ritual honor killings (e.g., in extremely traditional Islamic communities) are caused by an explosion of shame following the revelation of a family member's homosexuality. The disgrace caused by homosexuality can only be atoned for through brutal murder.

The bodies of queer people, or those perceived as such, were treated as objects of assault and subjected to extreme violence. In cases of violence against gay men, the body—particularly the parts that could potentially be used for sexual intercourse—is the main target. Vladislav's murder was ritualistic in nature. The intention of the murderers was to mutilate the victim in such a way as to leave no doubt that the murder was a punishment for the impurity and sinfulness of queer bodies. The sense of shame that I have described, stemming from the existence of a homosexual body, is closely linked to religious traditions and their teachings. According to monotheistic religious traditions, the queer body is sinful; however, it should be noted that the aggression in the holy books is directed toward homosexual men. As I wrote above, this aggression stems from patriarchy and the belief that semen is a sacred fluid that should only be used for fertilization.

A similar ritual murder occurred in the United States in 1998. The victim was Matthew Wayne Shepard, a 21-year-old gay man. After torturing him for a prolonged period, his tormentors crucified him (Faderman, 2015, pp. 556–558). During the trial, the murderers attempted to justify their actions on the basis that Matthew was gay (Sprinkle, 2011, p. 4). They thus attempted to share responsibility with the victim, just as Vladislav's murderers had done. Following the physical violence, some people continued the verbal abuse. During Matthew's funeral, clergymen appeared with banners bearing slogans such as "Hell exists. Ask Matthew" and "God rejoices in the death of a faggot" (these displays of hatred occurred in front of Matthew's parents). According to Ahmed's phenomenological metaphor, the phenomenon of violence against queer people consists in the queer body being most often annihilated by the straight body. In this sense, this annihilation is the second dimension of being, as Sartre would say (Sartre, 1957, p. 351).

Under Putin's deeply patriarchal vision of Russian traditionalism, only heterosexual men are considered real men. This has created a widespread atmosphere of homophobia, sparking an outburst of aggression directed exclusively at gay men. The introduction of homophobic legislation during Putin's era sparked a surge in neo-Nazi militia activity. In 2013, the skinhead Maxim Martsinkevich started hunting down gay Russians. He founded the informal organization Occupy Pedophilia (Russian: Оккупай-педофиляй) in 2010, which had branches throughout Russia. Martsinkevich declared that his militias would hunt down pedophiles—i.e., gay people—because, in their opinion, homosexuality was synonymous with pedophilia (Habeck & Schröder, 2016, pp. 11–12). The victims were humiliated, degraded, and beaten. Videos of these attacks were posted online (Buyantueva, 2022, pp. 113–114).

Violence against queer people is aimed at stigmatizing their bodies. Martsinkevich touched his victims while wearing black gloves to avoid coming into contact with their skin. Black gloves are worn to protect the aggressor and create a boundary between heterosexual and homosexual bodies. This dehumanizes the victims, whose bodies become strange and even repulsive objects in the eyes of their tormentors. Emmanuel Levinas perfectly described this mechanism (although he himself did not focus on violence against homosexuals). The following quotation is significant in this regard: "Violence consists in interrupting the continuity of persons, in making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves" (Levinas, 1979, p. 21). The tormentor has reduced the Other to a mere illustration of a concept or category, swallowing them up in the process. Violence transforms the victim into a plaything for the tormentor, who toys with them as a cat toys with a mouse it has caught. In the Putin era, fascist aggressors devise various ways of depersonalizing and humiliating their victims—the victim no longer has a face, but becomes an object with specific macroscopic characteristics and nothing more. Gay men were forced to perform degrading acts, such as simulating oral sex with a rainbow-colored dildo. Their hair was shaved off the top of their heads. Their skin was painted in rainbow colors. The victims were often half-naked and had offensive, vulgar slogans placed on their torsos. After these ritual photo shoots and videos, the victims were subjected to bloody torture. This was Martsinkevich's way of staging an initiation, after which the queer body could be treated even more cruelly. The use of black gloves clearly signaled that this body was not "normal" and posed a threat to "normal" men like heterosexual Martsinkevich.

Chechnya—Extermination Camps

As I mentioned above, queer bodies have become the target of ritualized homophobic violence. The perpetrators' aim is to mutilate the genitals and thus humiliate the victim. In the case of homosexual men, the aggressors focus particularly on the anus. In their eyes, it is a symbol of absolute deviance, disconnected from the rest of the victim's body. Mary Douglas often emphasized the symbolic and physical dimensions of the human body. The body reflects the microcosm of the community and repeats spatial boundaries. Let us recall Douglas's words: "The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious" (Douglas, 2001, p. 116). In Kadyrov's Chechnya, the queer body has become a symbol of diabolical forces. For the aggressors, it is considered unclean, contaminated and threatening; therefore, it must be mutilated and expelled beyond the boundaries of the traditional community. Kadyrov refuses to accept that Chechnya could be "corrupted" by homosexuality. The dictator has repeatedly called for gay people to be expelled from the region. This is why Ahmed has repeatedly stated that "queer" also has a spatial dimension, in that homophobia aims to remove queer bodies from heterosexual spaces. According to traditional rules, the queer body is considered to be outside the boundaries of the community that adheres to these principles.

Russian legislation at the federal level has, in a sense, legitimized and justified the unleashing of a "pink hunt." This "pink hunt" has been unleashed against LGBT+ people, particularly against gay men. Draconian anti-gay legislation has coincided with extreme anti-gay violence in various parts of Russia (Belmonte, 2021, pp. 187–188). According to reports by "Novaia Gazeta" and the Memorial Human Rights Center, in 2017 Chechnya began a "purge of sinful bodies," for which death camps were set up. These camps were used to carry out ritual torture, including brutal rape with various dangerous objects (this was probably the fate of the singer Zelimkan Bakayev). In Chechnya, lesbians were also victims of corrective rape or honor killings at the hands of their families. Kadyrov and his subordinates sought absolute control over women's bodies (Janoff, 2022, pp. 72–73). Women's bodies also became objects in the hands of their tormentors. This violence is not only conditioned by the instrumental application of Sharia law. In the USSR, violence against homosexuals was only superficially reduced in the

1920s. In Russian culture, the bodies of homosexual and transgender people were treated brutally by doctors. For example, one pseudo-study was intended to prove the homosexuality of an accused woman: "An attempt to stimulate the clitoris with a finger, carried out by Professor Fenomenov, was unsuccessful. However, such an attempt is not convincing, as homosexual women are generally uninterested in men" (Tarnovskii, 1895, p. 20). However, let us now turn to the topic of homophobia in Chechnya, which has been exacerbated by Putin's legislation.

In their article, Maria Brock and Emil Edenborg stated that the cause of violence against queer people in Chechnya was "archaic tribal culture, traditionalist attitudes among the population, and increased Muslim religiosity" (Brock & Edenborg, 2020, p. 677). While this thesis may sound convincing, it is insufficient to explain the phenomenon of violence against queer people. After all, aggression toward queer people is not limited to societies dominated by religion. For example, Guevara and Castro persecuted queer people shortly after the revolution, sending them to labor camps (López, 2015, pp. 39–49).

As I mentioned earlier, homophobic violence against homosexual and bisexual men focuses on the genitals and the idea that the victims are completely defined by their potential anality. The violence in the Chechen camps is strikingly similar to that suffered by gay men in Nazi concentration camps. Josef Kohout, a gay man who was imprisoned in a Nazi camp, wrote down his story and those of other prisoners who were arrested because of their sexual orientation. According to his account, SS officers, kapos, and fellow prisoners focused their attention on the genitals of gay men. Every roll call began with blows to the testicles. The guards were obsessed with the penises, testicles, and anuses of gay men. Kohout recounts one such violent incident: "You assholes, you butt-fuckers, you cocksuckers! I'll teach you tidiness! I'll make your asses boil!" (Heger, 1994, p. 68). This demonstrates the brutality and joy of torturing queer bodies. But what was the reason for this? Ahmed stated that homophobes cannot bear the thought that queer people can enjoy sex (Ahmed, 2014, p. 162). This explains why Kadyrov has never hidden his hatred of pride parades. The sight of happy, joyful queer people who are not ashamed of their sexuality and who enjoy closeness and intimacy infuriates homophobes, immediately arousing in them a desire to hurt queer people.

Homophobia involves the ritualistic repetition of dividing the world into two categories: one's own world and the foreign world. This pattern also applies to sexuality. People who are sexually different must be identified and expelled: this is why victims' genitals are mutilated and why Kadyrov himself has called for "cleansing the space" of queer people (Janoff, 2022, pp. 79–88). Only those who are different, i.e., familiar strangers, can be tolerated (Jedliński & Witczak, 2017, pp. 10–11). A gay man, on the other hand, represents absolute sexual otherness. As I have previously mentioned, primitive communities were expected to maintain purity by expelling sexually different individuals beyond their borders. This mechanism of stigmatization and expulsion is primitive; for example, it was described by Florian Znaniecki in his "Studja nad antagonizmem do obcych" (Znaniecki, 1931, pp. 42–50). The wound inflicted on the victim is intended to delineate the boundary between the norm of self-identity and sexual otherness. From a phenomenological perspective, therefore, violence against queer people—specifically, primarily against homosexual and bisexual men—is distinctly spatial. The world is divided into "us" and "them." In such a patriarchal and clan-based regime, everyone who is "one of us" and not an enemy must fulfill specific roles: women should bear multiple children and men should impregnate women and fight enemies. This explains why semen is fetishized, as it provides a means of fighting enemies through the birth of new offspring who will produce more offspring (women), impregnate them, and provide the community with further generations of fighters.

The Body During War

Every period of armed conflict makes the body much more likely to become the target of violence than in times of peace, and this must be understood if we are to break the cycle of violence. It is obvious that real armed conflict is often preceded by propaganda aimed at dehumanizing the enemy. Prior to the 2014 war in Ukraine, for example, Russia had already launched a propaganda campaign against the LGBT+ community. This community was branded as agents of the West. The West itself—Europe and America—was perceived as a hotbed of moral and sexual depravity.[4] As I have previously written,

[4] Incidentally, this anti-Western narrative has its roots in the Bolshevik period and even the pre-history of the Tsarist era, including 19th-century classical Slavophilism and Pan-Slavism.

Putin's propaganda is fixated on European gays, using the crude metaphor of "Gayrope." From a phenomenological perspective, it is worth noting that, during the Putin era, propaganda has elevated the binary division to an absolute condition of traditional conformity. As mentioned above, Conchita Wurst, the drag queen who performed at the Eurovision Song Contest, was one of the targets of this concerted attack. Right-wing and ultraconservative circles regarded the "woman with a beard" as an example of moral degeneration and the blurring of the boundaries between masculinity and femininity. The ongoing war with Ukraine, which began in 2014, exacerbated this crude attack on her, with extreme traditionalists claiming they wanted to save Ukraine from Western moral decay. Vulgar Russian conservatives fixated on the artist's body. Her beard became a symbol of the blurring of gender roles and identity, representing an assault on the sacred tradition that upholds the binary division. This division into heterosexuality (traditional and truly Russian) and homosexuality (anti-traditional and anti-Russian) corresponds to the traditional division into two genders. In this context, homosexuality is associated with masculine excess and a betrayal of true masculinity. However, camp itself does not necessarily have its roots in homosexuality, as Fabio Cleto argues. This shows that the attributes of heterosexuality can be fluid (Cleto, 1999, p. 3). From a phenomenological perspective, one might argue that what is considered traditional and 'normal' is influenced by the sedimented "givenness level" of the homeworld. As I mentioned earlier, this kind of sediment lies at the pre-reflective structure of the life-world. Butler—drawing on Husserl's terminology—writes that sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a "natural sex" or a "real woman." Over time, "corporeal styles," as defined by Butler, have emerged within the confines of tradition. These styles exist in a binary relationship with one another (Butler, 1999, p. 178). Let us consider an example of Russian patriarchy. In the world of traditional Russian culture, beards are exclusively for men. The beard is strongly associated with loyalty to tradition and veneration of the dominant heterosexual male, the tribal chief (a similar association exists in the Islamic world).

Throughout Putin's full-scale war against Ukraine, Russian culture has been dominated by the idea of total confrontation with the West, which is supposedly spreading immorality to countries like Russia, and since then, gay people have become synonymous with contemporary depravity and effeminacy that infects "real Russian men." In a narrative typical of a binary worldview, tradition is equated with good, while queer people are equated with evil, among other things. From a phenomenological standpoint, violence in a large-scale war becomes a systematized industry, in which previously hidden, pre-reflective desires to sadistically inflict pain come to the surface. Culture fades away, and people begin to treat the enemy's body as an experimental subject (for example, in the extermination camps of Nazi Germany and Kadyrov's Chechnya). In this anti-Western narrative, however, the promise of saving Ukraine is striking: a promise to save it from "metaphysical evil." The war against Ukraine and the genocide being committed against Ukrainians has further intensified homophobia, including in Chechnya. Media reports and interviews with refugees reveal that extreme violence against queer people remains an everyday occurrence in Chechnya during the war with Ukraine (Gavin, 2023). In Ukraine itself, Russian soldiers rape not only women, but men as well; sexual violence against men is a ritual of absolute domination intended to humiliate Ukrainians further (Shumylovych, 2025, p. 74). Although rape is presented as a form of punishment for sin, it is merely a pretext for the perpetrators, whose primary aim is to mutilate the bodies they loathe.

It is noteworthy that during the aggression against Ukraine, Putin's speeches have suggested that the LGBT+ community threatens Russian identity and contributes to a decline in fertility. Putin himself has stated: "Do we want children in the first years of school to be taught ideas that lead to degeneration and extinction?" (Kremlin.ru, 2022). As it was said, in Putin's Russia, the idea that demographic collapse is exacerbated by queer people is repeated like a mantra. The queer body is crudely portrayed as barren and useless because, in the eyes of its aggressors, it is unable to fulfill the patriotic and nationalist duty of procreation.

As I have previously mentioned, in reference to Ahmed's views, the fear held by Putin's supporters ignores the fact that no sexual orientation is associated with infertility. In many countries, queer people have children, thanks to friendly relationships between gay men and lesbians, among other methods. As Ahmed explains in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, sexual orientation relates to reproduction only if two people wish to form a relationship (Ahmed, 2014, p. 145). According to Ahmed, for ideologues of violence, the queer body is barren and infertile and has no right to sit at the common table because it will not contribute to the greater good. Ahmed, however, sees great value in queer families. Similarly, Andrew

Sullivan argues that by seeking marriage, queer people demonstrate to heterosexuals the importance of long-term relationships and starting a family (Sullivan, 1995, p. 112). Ahmed emphasizes that the only thing that makes queer families different is the way in which the queer body feels as if it is in a toxic environment. She draws attention to the various ways in which queer individuals and families learn to live, stating that "learning to live with the effects and affects of heterosexism and homophobia may be crucial to what makes queer families different from non-queer ones" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 154). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick also wrote about the issue of an inclusive understanding of the family. Of course, queer relationships do not have to be limited to family life. In general, relationships between people do not have to be limited to genital relationships. Romantic love between people of the same sex or trans people comes in many forms (Kosofsky-Sedgwick, 1994, pp. 71–72).

In authoritarian and totalitarian states, the atmosphere of war reduces social life to vulgar and grotesque violence. In his work *Logical Investigations*, Husserl states that nonsense and absurdity must not be placed on the same level, even though they are part of the realm of what is meaningful (Husserl, 2006, pp. 67–68). The phenomenon of violence allows for the creation of hyperbolic actions and is strongly evident in this meaningfulness. The following event illustrates this: On the night of 22–23 November 2024, there was a Russian anti-terrorist raid on the "Zebra" club in the city of Voronezh. Following a violent dispersal, 40 LGBT+ people were put on a police bus. Among those arrested was the drag queen artist Zaza Napoli, who was performing at the club. This was an inevitable consequence and a physical manifestation of Russian legislation which, since 2023, has recognized the LGBT+ movement as extremist.[5] Similar raids based on reports from so-called defenders of traditional Russian values have taken place in other underground clubs (for example, at the "Tochka" club in Chita and at the "Rose" club in Orenburg). A common pattern in these raids by aggressive anti-terrorist forces involves beating, humiliating, and hurling abuse at queer people lying on the floor; some victims are then immediately

[5] Consequently, the fight against the LGBT+ movement involves the deployment of anti-terrorist forces. According to the Russian Criminal Code, involvement in LGBT+ extremism carries a sentence of up to 10 years in a penal colony. In practice, this means that displaying a rainbow flag or wearing a rainbow bracelet could be considered a terrorist threat to Russia.

forcibly conscripted into the army and sent to the front line to fight against Ukraine (Leybin, 2025).

Russian anti-terrorists wore black gloves during the raids on the gay clubs. Martsinkevich, a neo-Nazi, wore similar gloves. It is striking that criminals, neo-Nazis and the police employ the same methods of verbal and physical violence. These black gloves symbolize violence, revulsion and contempt, as well as the deliberate dehumanization of the victims. Gloves protect the perpetrator from contact with the blood of their victim. Furthermore, the glove signifies the boundary between the world of the "true masculine" aggressor and the homosexual man, whom the aggressor deems unworthy of belonging to the "true masculine" world. Avoiding skin-to-skin contact creates a very firm boundary between the perpetrator and that which he despises and hates.

Violence ceases to be abstract when it is experienced as pain in even the smallest wound; every wound inflicted by the aggressor is a sign of the tormentor's sadistic domination and pleasure. Ahmed argues that violence devastates the body. It is not merely a matter of physically slicing the victim's tissue and causing blood to flow. Even in its initial stage of discrimination, violence has a negative impact on the body: "Such forms of discrimination can have negative effects involving pain, anxiety, fear, depression and shame, all of which can restrict the body" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 154). At this point, we should note the shame that I mentioned when describing the violent incident involving Vladislav. Although it is difficult to define shame unequivocally, it plays a significant role in the theater of violence. Returning to my earlier reflections on tradition, I must again emphasize that its accumulated sediments—such as disgust, the dominance of the binary gender division, the cult of virginity, hypocrisy and silence surrounding sex—are particularly painful for queer people, especially gay men. When their homosexuality is revealed within the community, it triggers an explosion of shame not only for them, but for the entire community. Before gaining life experience, a person functions in a pre-reflective world, probably feeling no shame. It is only oppressive tradition that imposes this emotional state. This feeling is determined by where one finds oneself, the specific circumstances and the culture. Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann stated that my present "now" is the starting point for my spatial orientation (Schütz & Luckmann, 1974, p. 36). Gay and transgender Russians are trapped in a world of violence, particularly during wartime. Aggressors impose a sense of shame on homosexuals, and it could be argued that wartime politics of shame are intended to justify violence. The aggressor's shame, rooted in traditional principles, intensifies their desire to harm homosexuals.

Conclusion

I would like to draw attention to an incident affecting the queer community that could lead to further violence in the near future. On August 6, 2025, Russia announced its intention to formally withdraw from the European Convention against Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Guilbert, 2025). What might this mean for the Russian and Ukrainian LGBT+ communities? Many soldiers serving in the Ukrainian army are open about their sexual orientation. They are fighting for a free Ukraine and for their dignity. A Russian victory would mean one thing for them: genocide preceded by torture. Let us not forget that this war is being fought in the name of tradition and so-called traditional Russian values. Adherence to these values implies the primacy of the ideal of heterosexual intimacy. In this case, tradition and traditionalism are associated with violence, in that tradition is the source of pre-reflective patterns of thought that justify violence.

In Putin's homophobic world, violence is fully justified. Therefore, from the Putin regime's point of view, the anti-terrorist operation is perfectly reasonable. Not only does Putin's regime see the sense in this violence, it also sees it as its mission to eradicate queer people from Russia. This violence is intended to force queer people back into hiding, locking them away in dark basements or, preferably, burying them in mass graves, as was the case in Chechnya. In light of the above, one might wonder whether the abolition of authoritarian rule in Russia would put an end to violence against queer people. In his essay *Aporien der Gewalt* Waldenfels provocatively stated that violence could only be stopped by violence (Waldenfels, 2000, p. 24). However, Waldenfels' statement needs to be supplemented. Defensive violence can protect queer people. This is why so many queer soldiers are fighting on the front lines against Putin's troops.

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The Dialectic of Remembering and Forgetting in Memory Therapy: Ricoeur in Dialogue with Psychoanalysis

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Słowa kluczowe: pamięć, przypominanie, przywoływanie, zapominanie, przebaczenie, przymus powtarzania, przepracowanie

Abstract

The article analyzes the impact of violence on memory and examines the scope of forgiveness in neutralizing negativity derived from memory distortion. Referring to the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur and the classical psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud, the article discusses the characteristics of memory deficiency and excess, along with their impact on the formation of the historical narrative of a community and its identity. Pathological forms of memory are analyzed, which, through the psychoanalytic concepts of repression and melancholy, can result in compulsive repetition or manic states. By juxtaposing Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology with psychoanalytic theory, the article analyzes various modes of recalling and oblivion. It also shows the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, which, along with the entire process of working-through and mourning, can lead to forgiveness. This process provides both the guilty party and the victim with the prospect of regaining the ability to shape their lives independently of their determinative past, within the framework of Ricoeur's phenomenology of the capable human being.

Introduction

Memory, as the human ability to retain impressions, experiences, and stories, is extremely sensitive to forms of violence that can affect it from different sources. On the one hand, memory can be influenced by events that involve the individual. On the other, it can be shaped by the circumstances in which it is formed. Finally, the deformation of memory can also involve its recipient, who may seek to impose a specific historical narrative, often in the construction of propaganda or official accounts. This deformation often takes pathological forms of remembering or forgetting, as excess or deficiency. This article seeks to explore this issue through a critical dialogue between Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology of memory and psychoanalytic theory, particularly the Freudian legacy concerning repression, trauma, and repetition. Ricoeur has made a significant contribution to phenomenological research on memory and its confrontation with psychoanalysis.

In this article, I examine how Ricoeur reinterprets key Freudian concepts—repression, repetition, mourning, melancholia—and their impact on the formation of memory. I also consider how Ricoeur's notion of forgiveness operates as a therapeutic praxis that addresses not only individual neuroses but also the psychic wounds of communities. I show how Ricoeur, by articulating the psychic economy of memory, brings to light the intimate link between symptom and story, trauma and testimony, and the pathology of repetition and the promise of forgiveness.

This inquiry seeks to demonstrate that the healing of memory—whether in the analyst's consulting room or in historical discourse—depends on a process of working through that involves elements of forgetting and remembering. Unlike their pathological forms of excess and deficiency, these enter into a dialectic that cultivates forms of recall and forgetting, enabling promises to be kept and forgiveness to occur.

Vulnerability of Memory

Forgiveness is one of the possible responses to the negativity associated with one's own or other people's actions. This negativity is embedded in human memory, manifesting itself through the inability to recall certain facts from the past and the spontaneous recurrence of other memories. People often associate this negativity with a lack of trust in themselves and others. Forgiveness is a response that has the potential to neutralize this negativity still present in memory and to lead to numerous consequences. An exhaustive description of this potential for forgiveness requires an examination of negativity, which takes various forms, distorting or blocking human memory. Ricoeur examines these memory pathologies with a particular emphasis on the psychoanalytic perspective. He begins with two Freudian texts: *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through* and *Mourning and Melancholia*. He then describes and reinterprets the process of memory distortion and its consequences. He links these Freudian texts to community-level phenomena, in which members are connected through various intersubjective relationships and possess certain shared memories that form the domain of collective memory (Lythgoe, 2017, pp. 56–57). Collective memory is closely tied to historical narrative, which, on the one hand, provides a critique of memory and prevents it from autonomously establishing a sense of the past. Historical narrative continually co-shapes the memory of individuals and communities. History, on the other hand, is co-shaped by the memories of both past and present generations (Ricoeur, 2015, p. 150). As a result, this collective memory—important for the formation of community identity—is particularly vulnerable to manipulation by various ideologies. The pathologies of excess and deficiency of memory become particularly evident in this domain, affecting the memory of individuals who constitute these communities (Ricoeur, 2008, pp. 9–12).

Traumas resulting from painful events of the past persist for a long time in collective memory and are among the most common causes of memory excess or deficiency—pathologies that also extend to subsequent generations. Marianne Hirsch describes the transmission of trauma, particularly to the children of victims who did not personally experience the trauma, as the concept of postmemory (Hirsch, 1997, pp. 22–23). Postmemory is based on images that draw on victims' narratives to replace memories. It can involve a wide variety of narratives that enable the transfer of trauma within both familial and social contexts. Ricoeur emphasizes that trauma can overwhelm narratives and express itself through experiences that are incommunicable in words (Ricoeur, 2016b, p. 252). Antoni Kępiński, a Polish psychiatrist, studied former concentration camp inmates' lifelong concentration camp syndrome (Kępiński, 2005, pp. 144–153). His successors pointed to the process of transmission of this syndrome to offspring and its manifestation in subsequent generations (Dominik, 2005, pp. 232–237). Postmemory, which elucidates the intergenerational perpetuation of trauma, impacts not just the generations following the victims, but also those associated with the perpetrators and those who indifferently observed the injustice inflicted upon others. Ricoeur recalls the words of a German historian about the Nazi past, which refuses to pass and lacks the necessary distance from the present (Ricoeur, 2004c, p. 7). He also alludes to the ongoing political dispute and obsession with the collaborationist Vichy government, whose members and numerous collaborators were not held accountable due to amnesty. This was accompanied by a lack of narrative about that period, which facilitated the loss of memory. At the same time, this memory deficit led to an incapacity to "work through" the difficult events, which subsequently resurfaced in various pathological forms of political conflict, displacing earlier memories (Ricoeur, 2004b, pp. 452–499).

He emphasizes that traumatic experiences leading to memory deficiency or excess are themselves a form of forgetting. It is a dangerous oblivion that distorts history rather than facilitating the healthy evolution of human memory by purging the mind of superfluous recollections. This amnesia, which threatens recollection, may stem from several sources, including ideological constraints imposed by specific doctrines and the traumatic suppression of personal narratives (Ricoeur & Żakowski, 2002, pp. 45–47). Oblivion is a clear sign of memory deficiency, but it can also result from denying a fact or, as he stresses, from avoiding the effort to remember the past: "the expression of bad faith and its strategy of evasion motivated by an obscure will not to inform oneself, not to investigate the harm done by the citizen's environment, in short by a wanting-not-to-know" (Ricoeur, 2004b, pp. 448–449). He illustrates this memory deficit with numerous examples that concern not only violence victims but also perpetrators. He also draws attention to the problem of memory excess, which—constantly recurring in memories of painful experiences of wrongs suffered or, less frequently, joyful moments of triumph—contributes to forgetting other, often already infamous moments of a community's history. Moreover, in some areas, this excess of memory may serve as a strategy to avoid recollecting past events, and it can be attributed to either the deliberate actions of the ideological state apparatuses or the repression that occurs at the collective memory level, which in turn shapes the individual memory of community members.

Repetition Compulsion and the Anonymous Circle of Revenge

Ricoeur emphasizes that memory deficiency or excess can lead to many violent actions that cause harm to others. He finds arguments for linking some violent actions to forgetting, not only in the testimonies of recent history but also in Freud's text *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through*. Freud believes that past experience is indestructible and that the unconscious, which is part of the human psychic apparatus, is characterized by timelessness that disregards the usual chronology of time (Freud, 1958e, pp. 70–71). Therefore, everything repressed or forgotten, including experiences that have always remained outside consciousness, can recur as a "repetition compulsion" (*Wiederholungszwang*), often manifesting as actions (*Agieren*), influencing the subject's attitude and character traits, and manifesting itself in numerous symptoms. Freud writes:

> The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it. Thus he acquires no sense of conviction of the correctness of the construction that has been communicated to him. He is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past.
>
> (Freud, 1955, p. 18)

The repetition compulsion results in actions that fulfill the function of remembering and recur within the dynamics of memory. Naturally, the subject does not know that these actions are the result of memory reproduction (Ricoeur, 1970, pp. 286–287). Moreover, this unconscious repetition compulsion does not lead the subject to recollect what these actions replace or reproduce. This inability to remember the past is caused by "resistance to repression" (*Verdrängungswiderstand*), the overcoming of which requires a long period of "working-through" (*Durcharbeiten*) (Freud, 1958d, pp. 147–156). Ricoeur notes that the repetition compulsion often pertains to forgotten traumatic events, typically associated with violence. I argue that the compulsion to repeat these events, replacing memories, frequently leads to the continuation of violence, serving as its unconscious extension. It is known as "repetition-memory" and differs from "recollection-memory," which, as an active form of memory, has a critical function. I argue that this understanding of forgetting, together with the blocked possibility of critically revisiting the past, explains the unconscious mechanism of repetition compulsion and makes it possible to interpret some actions within the anonymous circle of revenge. The desire to exact revenge on the perpetrator no longer governs the process; instead, blind violence acting as chaotic reciprocity selects completely random individuals as its new victims. In this way, violence exits the circle of vengeance and spills over into new areas of intersubjective relations, scarring other people's memories with the experience of harm (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 229).

Ricoeur draws attention to the particular danger of repetition compulsion in the field of collective memory, where it can transform into obsession or mania as an extreme form of action (Ricoeur, 2004b, pp. 443–444). It may appear not only as an action that is one form of repetition compulsion of the forgotten, but also as an effect of the inability to reconcile oneself to the loss of a loved or hated object (Ricoeur, 1995, p. 86). He cites the second Freudian text, *Mourning and Melancholia*, to explain this problem. Freud suggests that intense activity in the form of mania may arise from the subject's inability to cope with the loss of the object of affect and may be followed by extended periods of sadness, depression, or lack of initiative, which characterize the melancholic state. Meanwhile, melancholy often results from an excess of memory of the loss of a beloved or hated object within narcissistic patterns of attachment.[1] In particular, this lack of distance in narcissistic love morbidly integrates the subject with the object of affect, so that its loss is at the same time a loss of a part of oneself, leading to a disturbance in the subject's personal identity (Ricoeur, 1970, pp. 217–219).

> If one listens patiently to a melancholic's many and various self-accusations, one cannot in the end avoid the impression that often the most violent of them are hardly at all applicable to the patient himself, but that with insignificant modifications they do fit someone else, someone whom the patient loves or has loved or should love (…) So we find the key to the clinical picture: we perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches

[1] Ricoeur, following Heinz Kohut, points out that narcissism in its primordial forms is not a pathological phenomenon but relation of self-love involving *selfobjects* that enables the integration and constitution of a coherent identity in the developing subject. In adulthood, mature forms of narcissism integrate fantasies of grandeur with reality and become the basis of self-esteem, enabling the development of creativity, the achievement of ambitions, and a sense of humor, etc. (Kohut, 1966, pp. 243–272; Ricoeur, 1992, p. 332; 2012, pp. 74–75, 79–80).

> against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego.
>
> (Freud, 1958b, p. 248)

I take the view that in a state of mania a subject's actions in response to a lost love can be as dangerous as those driven by repetition compulsion. In particular, melancholy not only refers to an individual's incapacity to mourn but also to entire communities, societies, and nations that have lost an object of love: the state, territory, community members, material goods, or leaders. The attempt to replace the object of love with a new one, solely to fill the lack felt and recognized in oneself, without undertaking the difficult working-through of mourning, often leads to conflicts and wars. History is replete with examples in which a community affected by loss—instead of working-through the past in a process of mourning and opening itself to the future—remains in melancholic stagnation, interrupted only by a violent, often warlike action that provides an illusory overcoming of loss. Similarly, when an individual or community loses an object of hatred that co-shaped their identity, they often seek a new enemy instead of working-through and mourning. The majority of citizens in the countries behind the Iron Curtain hated communism, and its collapse served as a large laboratory for the identities of individuals and social groups, shaped, following Carl Schmitt, by opposition to Stalinist ideology and its institutions (Schmitt, 2007, pp. 27–58). The collapse of communism led to a search for new enemies. The lingering sense of injustice in memory, as well as its reinforcement in political narratives, intensified this search. These narratives often emphasize the West's indifference to the fate of societies incorporated into the Soviet sphere of influence after the war (Ricoeur, 2021a, p. 190). I contend that mourning, which separates the subject from the object of hatred, becomes more difficult the more forgiveness it requires.

Remembering and Forgetting

Ricoeur, following Freud, connects both a deficiency and an excess of memory with an illness that manifests itself through traumas and symptoms, with repetition compulsion at its core. On the other hand, he likens forgiveness to healing, which emphasizes remembering and forgetting (Ricoeur, 1995, p. 77). Depending on the situation, this process targets either the forgetting that poses a threat to the subject or the excess of memories. It concerns both victims and perpetrators: Ricoeur emphasizes that just as the art of healing requires the presence of another in the role of a doctor, work on memory necessitates the collaboration of a psychoanalyst or even a historian, especially in the case of collective memory. A variation of this healing work of memory, which takes the form of forgiveness, also requires the presence of another. Building on Hannah Arendt's ideas, Ricoeur shows that these acts can only be realized from the perspective of multiplicity, which implies the necessity of the other's presence (Arendt, 1998, p. 237; Ricoeur, 2005, pp. 161–162). At the same time, this plurality manifests itself in various ways, ranging from the presence of someone capable of forgiving to the encounter with another who can extend forgiveness or expect one to keep one's word. Ultimately, the assistance of another person is essential for both remembering the factual details of the past and for selectively forgetting particular aspects of them (Ricoeur, 1999, p. 23). These two actions collectively contribute to forgiveness in a permanent state of tension.

According to Ricoeur, forgiveness is a fundamental possibility for recovering from the traps of memory that fixate the subject on past events. These can burden the subject in two ways: guilt and debt.[2] He situates forgiveness between the "work of memory" and the "work of mourning" and indicates that true pardon requires the "work of recollection" (*Erinnerungsarbeit*), which recalls difficult experiences of wrongs suffered and their perpetrators in the memory of the victims. Wrongdoers, in turn, are reminded of their guilt and their debt to victims, opening the possibility of taking responsibility for the acts attributed to them. The work of recollection is accompanied by the basic psychoanalytic principle of utterance, which has a therapeutic function: the "talking cure" (Ricoeur, 1970, pp. 388–389). It combines recalling and recognizing the past, identifying oneself with the past self, and understanding and remembering (Ricoeur, 2000, pp. 734–736). This process of bringing the past into consciousness becomes a fundamental element in overcoming

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[2] The difference between guilt and debt is subtle, as evidenced by the fact that German uses the term *Schuld* for both. Ricoeur emphasizes that guilt enables the articulation of a subjective consciousness burdened by the consequences of its actions and susceptible to the reproaches of its own conscience. In contrast, debt arising from guilt belongs to the domain of objective attribution and denotes a condition that may be formally recognized, for example by a court (Gagnebin, 2019, p. 139; Ricoeur, 1969a, p. 104; 1969b, pp. 15–16).

"resistance to repression" (*Verdrängungswiderstand*) (Drwięga, 2019, p. 144). Only when the subject in the work of recollection gains access to the past and subjects it to a process of "working-through" (*Durcharbeiten*), does the "work of interpretation" (*Deutungsarbeit*) of historical facts reveal the multiplicity of their meanings, opening the perspective of penitence and forgiveness. During mourning, one can distance oneself from objects of love and hatred that persistently cause pain due to their absence (Ricoeur, 2004b, p. 446). Mourning means accepting the loss of these objects and reconciling oneself to the impossibility of constructing a narrative of the past without further losses (Ricoeur, 1999, p. 23). The possibility of forgiveness emerges when one accepts a narrative of the past that renounces the desire for revenge, anger, or malice from the victim's perspective (Ricoeur, 2021b, pp. 173–181).

Ricoeur points out that this narrative mediation, which plays a key role in the work of recollection, in working-through, and in interpreting the meaning of the past, brings the psychoanalyst and the historian closer together. Their collaboration, often involving the patient or a collective subject, enables the telling of past events from diverse perspectives: those of victims and perpetrators, women and men, individuals with differing worldviews and religious beliefs, and members of different nations and communities (Ricoeur, 1995, p. 79). It takes into account not only the narratives of victors but also those who remain in the shadow of history (Leeuw, 2022, pp. 99–100). The stories of those who suffer demand to be told even more urgently (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 28). Learning to discuss the past in a new, forgiving light entails renouncing the active evocation of painful memories (Daughton, 2022, pp. 70–75). In this way, the narrative does not shift the subject to the past, which, in melancholy or desire for revenge, seeks to replace the present. Forgiveness brings a form of oblivion grounded in abandoning the constant recall of painful experiences. Recollection that enables forgiveness also creates a sense of forgetting; this forgetting constitutes one aspect of forgiveness. The second aspect involves remembering this forgetting (Ricoeur, 2004b, p. 454).

This aporetic juxtaposition of recollection and forgetting becomes clearer in Ricoeur's comparison of two kinds of memory: *mnēmē-memoria* and *anamnēsis-reminiscentia*. The former characterizes passive memory, which involuntarily recurs at different moments in life, presenting the subject with images from the past. In contrast, the latter represents active memory, where the subject actively reaches into the past to retrieve memories (Ricoeur, 2004b, pp. 17–21). I take the view that *anamnēsis-reminiscentia*, also called *ars memoriae*, has been known since antiquity as an art and practice that served not only study (in the formula *repetitio est mater studiorum*) but also the maintenance of identity in religious communities, medieval *Christianitas*, and later nation-states. These two types of memory correspond to two types of forgetting: passive and active. Passive forgetting results from the inability to recall the past due to various obstacles, ranging from blockages and resistance to repression studied in psychoanalysis to the absence of historical narrative and traces of the past (Ricoeur, 2016a, pp. 259–260). In contrast, active forgetting is associated with a deliberate shift in perspective toward the past. On the one hand, it can be linked to forgiveness and entail a shift in how the past is discussed; on the other, in its most extreme form, it can lead to oblivion through the erasure of the past and the destruction of its traces, including archives, testimonies, mementos, monuments, culture and art, and even those who remember (Ricoeur, 2004c, p. 7).

Ricoeur's distinction between types of memory and forgetting, added to Freudian analysis, provides a deeper understanding of the dialectic between recollection and forgetting, highlighting the role of forgiveness and promise in healing memory. Passive forgetting, together with forms of active forgetting based on excuses and evasions that block the work of recollection, corresponds to the repetition compulsion described by Freud. By contrast, only working-through, which reaches the repressed area and overcomes the "repression resistance," opens the subject to the past (Ricoeur, 1970, pp. 412–413). The work of recollection may include forgiveness, while the "work of interpretation" involves making sense of the past. It presupposes a form of active forgetting—a renunciation of aggressive narrative recall—that allows the subject to relinquish the burden of the past that paralyzes memory and limits action (Ricoeur, 1998b, pp. 25–28). As Ricoeur emphasizes, "Forgiveness gives memory a future" (2008, p. 18). At the same time, Ricoeur cautions that forgetting must be treated carefully to avoid erasing past facts and reactivating pathological memory. On the one hand, forgiveness as forgetting must not forget itself—that is, the act of active forgetting. Only then can forgiveness remain self-aware and avoid the recurrence of a painful excess of past memory (Ricoeur, 2008, p. 17). On the other hand, forgetting in the mode of forgiveness cannot include past events and facts, which must be preserved as they enrich both individual wisdom and generational historical knowledge (Ricoeur, 1965, pp. 82–84). Forgiveness, misunderstood as erasing trauma and injustice, would risk the recurrence of such events.

Pathological Forms of Forgetting

Ricoeur uses political and religious examples to illustrate this danger of forgetting. In the first example, he highlights the danger of amnesty as institutional forgiveness turning into a form of amnesia. According to him, this was the case in France's post-war history, where amnesty was intended to address the issue of citizens collaborating with the Vichy government. It represented a kind of injunction to forget, ordering the erasure of historical facts from memory. Ricoeur defines this imperative not to remember the past as a mode of memory that contradicts past events (*mnesikakein*), tracing its origins to an ancient Athenian decree that forbade citizens from recalling crimes committed by both sides. From the outset, the decree—justifying the injunction by describing crimes as "misfortunes"—revealed an attempt to erase memory. However, repressed experience does not cease to exist, which is why, in the 1990s, recurring disputes over settling accounts with the past led to sharp political conflicts in France (Ricoeur, 2004b, pp. 449–452). This shows that the courts cannot serve as instances of forgiveness and that the law cannot mandate non-remembrance, as this would lead to impunity (Fiasse, 2007, p. 373). Ultimately, Ricoeur does not deny the rare necessity of amnesty, although he stresses that it should be accompanied by a process of working through and mourning, both of which involve recalling the painful past.[3] He further emphasizes that each affected member of the community should ultimately choose to replace the injunction to forget with a pacified memory (Ricoeur, 2015, p. 156).

Ricoeur considers a similar pathological form of forgetting in a religious context, stressing that the "forgiveness of sins," as a sacrament and religious practice, cannot—from a human perspective—mean the erasure of past facts from history and memory (Ricoeur, 2004b, p. 488). I contend that some

[3] Ricoeur refers to the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa as an example of amnesty, linking the memory of a painful past to its reworking. The TRC, established under the presidency of Nelson Mandela, provided a space for victims' public testimony and allowed perpetrators to seek amnesty in exchange for full disclosure of politically motivated crimes (Ricoeur, 2004b, pp. 483–486).

people claim this divine prerogative of forgetting. They believe they can receive divine forgiveness and relieve themselves of the burden of guilt without having to confront the past or seek pardon from the wronged party. Often, this desire to forget is linked to the wish to free oneself from anxiety, which, as Freud points out, results from a harsh *superego* formed in upbringing and mistakenly identified with the Christian conscience, which in the classical sense is a judgement based on an inner law (Freud, 1958c, pp. 95–98).[4] This escape from remembering—often a result of neurotic rumination on guilt—may use the Christian concept of conscience as a convenient means of avoiding anxiety (Kłoczowski, 2010, pp. 121–133). It forms part of what is described as ecclesiogenic neurosis and represents a defense mechanism operating at an unconscious level (Prusak, 2016, pp. 34–40).[5] In *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricoeur delineates another characteristic of the *superego*:

> But one trait of the superego remained unexplained: its harshness and cruelty. This strange character rejoins other disconcerting phenomena which at first glance seem unrelated to it, such as the resistance to recovery. When one comes to see that this resistance has a "moral" aspect to it, that it is a form of self-punishment through suffering and that it therefore involves an unconscious sense of guilt finding its satisfaction in the illness, a consistent pattern is revealed which includes such different phenomena as obsessional neurosis and melancholia, the resistance to recovery, and the severity of the normal conscience. Let's not go back over the question of whether it is correct to speak of an "unconscious sense of guilt."
>
> (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 298)

As psychoanalytic experience—which in this case coincides with confessional experience—demonstrates, one cannot erase the past, and its apparent forgetting, which is in fact repression, consistently resurfaces in anxiety and remorse.[6] I argue that the passage from the most frequently repeated Christian

[4] The initial identification of conscience with the superego is refined in Freud's later writings, where conscience and the *ego ideal* (*Ideal-Ich*) are presented as components or functions of the *superego* (Freud, 1958a, pp. 123–132).

[5] Ricoeur also draws attention to the pathology of scrupulous consciousness, which locks itself into the trap of constructing new prohibitions that structure action and ritualize everyday life (Ricoeur, 1969a, pp. 105–106).

[6] In analyzing the psychoanalytic experience of recurring anxiety, Ricoeur refers to Freud's distinction. Freud describes anxiety (*Angst*) as an uncomfortable anticipation of danger, and distinguishes it from fright (*Schreck*) and fear (*Furcht*). Ricoeur

prayer, "and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12), expresses only one, vertical direction of forgiveness, in which forgiving others guarantees divine forgiveness and implies belief in the Absolute's non-recall of the past. However, another, horizontal dimension of forgiveness—present in other biblical passages—is characterized by human reciprocity and is linked to the religious practices of repentance and atonement.[7] Its purpose is to preserve the memory of evil and prevent its recurrence. It also underscores the importance of asking forgiveness—from the one who incurred guilt toward the wronged person.

The Prospective Nature of Forgiveness and the Empowerment of the Subject

Ricoeur, following Reinhart Koselleck, notes that the work of recollection and the imbuing of memories with new meanings do not end in the past or present but extend into the future (Ricoeur, 2008, p. 14). The act of forgiveness lies at the convergence of archaeology and eschatology, two opposing hermeneutics found together in forgiveness (Ricoeur, 1989, pp. 330–333). This paradoxical juxtaposition of the past with its prospective dimension reveals the healing role of forgiveness as a horizon for establishing new meanings with regard to the immutable facts of the past. Ricoeur frequently cites Augustine's formula, which juxtaposes the present of the past with the present of the future, revealing a promise that supports forgiveness in the healing process of memory (Augustine, 1953, pp. 327–366; Ricoeur, 2009, pp. 5–19). I argue that forgiveness itself contains an element of promise, affirming that the forgiveness of evil is final and does not entail additional conditions. It implies that in the future, forgiveness will be unquestioned

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emphasizes that the past does not disappear and that unresolved anxiety returns. At the same time, he emphasizes the role of fright, pointing to its adaptive or preparatory dimension in contrast to the anticipatory character of anxiety; it is not an expectation of danger, but a response that prepares the subject for it (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 288).

[7] Matthew the Evangelist offers a horizontal dimension of mutual reconciliation that includes a request for forgiveness. "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23–24).

and the past will not be recalled in a way that renews the perpetrator's guilt. At the same time, the promise supports forgiveness when a person needs time to work through the necessary stages to forgive (Kumorek, 2025, pp. 10–12). In extreme cases, when forgiveness is impossible due to the scale of the atrocities or the death of the one who could forgive, the promise assumes the role of restraining revenge (Ricoeur, 1990, pp. 245–246, 1998a, pp. 122–126). It often takes a silent form, expressed as a refusal to accuse or seek vengeance, thereby enabling peaceful coexistence.[8]

A person can work on the present of the past—that is, memory—while the work on the present of the future is not reduced to passive expectation but takes the form of a promise in the dialectic of past and future (Ricoeur, 1995, p. 81). The past constantly refers to this promise, which appears at the level of both psychoanalysis and history. These disciplines promise to uncover the past and endow it with meanings that allow it to break free from its burdens. Ricoeur emphasizes that promises, whether unfulfilled or flawed, contribute to this burden and continue to injure the memory. Politicians, alongside psychoanalysts and historians, may contribute to the healing of memory. Their role is to revive unfulfilled but constructive promises that can restore the living traditions of nations, communities, or families, as Ricoeur notes after Arendt (Ricoeur, 2008, pp. 15–16). Drawing on Immanuel Kant's *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, Ricoeur argues that promises open the prospect of a civil society governed by law. However, these promises—while acquiring an almost prophetic character within an eschatological horizon—still remain vulnerable to failure (Ricoeur, 2004a, pp. 33–34).

Ricoeur situates forgiveness between the work of recollection and the work of mourning, while emphasizing that it is not merely their sum; rather, it introduces an additional element: the gift (Ricoeur, 1995, pp. 81–82). This element gives forgiveness something of the generosity of the initial gift, which, as in Jacques Derrida's horizon of impossibility, does not wait for a request, regret, or repentance. Instead, it grants the perpetrator—burdened with guilt and debt—freedom from the past. This does not erase history

[8] Reflecting on ongoing conflicts between Palestinians and Israelis, Albanians and Serbs, and Kurds and Turks, Ricoeur suggests that a provisional normalization of relations may be achievable through a form of "anonymous forgiveness," which may arise in situations where an overwhelming number of grievances obstructs formal forgiveness in the immediate future (Ricoeur, 2004c, p. 11).

but separates the subject from guilt and debt (Ricoeur, 1969b, pp. 39–40). I contend that the subject freed from guilt and debt not only regains capacities diminished by reduced social esteem, respect, and self-confidence, but also gains the prospect of working on memory. By renouncing the constant recall of the past, those who forgive also open their memory to the future and acquire the capacity to act freely, without being constrained by the past (Kumorek, 2025, pp. 18–20).

Conclusion

In this article, I have presented an analysis of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to memory, emphasizing its vulnerability to violence and the disorders of recollection. By interfacing Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology with Freudian psychoanalysis—particularly the concepts of repression, repetition compulsion, mourning, and melancholia—I aim to show how memory serves as both a locus of trauma and a domain of ethical responsibility. Memory, whether personal or communal, is often characterized by excesses and deficits manifested in symptoms, ideology, and historical narrative. I have illustrated how working-through (*Durcharbeiten*) aims to reconcile the subject with past traumas through a dialectic of remembering and forgetting and thereby opposes both retribution and the erasure of memory. Ricoeur, influenced by Freudian concepts—especially the unconscious compulsion to repeat trauma through behavior—views memory as a psychic dimension intertwined with identity and intersubjectivity. The melancholic fixation on loss—whether of beloved objects, communities, or ideals—can paralyze both individual and collective agency, while the repression of guilt or suffering may perpetuate cycles of violence. In this context, forgiveness does not signify the negation of history; rather, it constitutes a healing practice that reorients memory toward the future. It lies between the work of mourning and the work of recollection, enabling subjects to overcome guilt and restore narrative coherence. It may be compared to the work of translation, which Ricoeur situates between the loss of the original meaning and the acceptance that will bring back a certain kind of freedom and happiness (Ricoeur, 2006, pp. 3–5). Forgiveness, thus conceived, requires a relationship with the other—historian, psychoanalyst, victim, or perpetrator—and incorporates both remembering and an active, ethical form of forgetting. It is not equivalent to amnesty or divine absolution, which entails the erasure of memory. Instead, it functions as a form of promise that creates new possibilities and resists both revenge and forgetting. Forgiveness, understood as a gift, frees memory from its burdens, enabling both individuals and communities to look forward to a future grounded in justice, responsibility, and the reconfiguration of their narratives.

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The Ontological Dimension of Violence in the Thought and Practice of Martin Heidegger

Keywords: administration, Heidegger, ontology, technology, violence, Walten
Słowa kluczowe: administracja, Heidegger, ontologia, przemoc, technika, *Walten*

Abstract

This article investigates two levels at which violence is disclosed in Heidegger's thought and practice: the ontological, as the structure of *physis*, and the ontic, as concrete administrative practice within the university. In *Basic Concepts of Metaphysics* (1929–1930), Heidegger introduces *Walten* as a novel ontological term, originally conceived as an innovative translation of Aristotelian *physis*, typically rendered as "nature." Over time, however, *Walten* becomes interwoven with related terms such as *durchwalten* and *verwalten*, expanding its semantic range to include domination, coercion, governance, and administration. In this sense, *physis* is not simply the sum of entities within the world but the force enabling beings to appear as beings. *Walten* thus designates a prevailing ontological sway that structures human attunement to Being, most decisively in and through language. This ontological conception finds an ontic correlate in Heidegger's role as rector of the University of Freiburg, where motifs associated with *Walten* were enacted within the sphere of academic governance. The article therefore uncovers both the ontological dimension of violence and the problematic manner in which this structure was translated into the institutional and political domain of university administration.

Violence is an ambiguous and multifaceted phenomenon. Within phenomenological analyses, it is too often and too hastily reduced to the exertion of force upon another's will—an attempt to overpower and subdue it (Filek, 2010, p. 6). At the same time, violence is almost invariably qualified as an unequivocal evil (Drwięga, 2024, p. 55). Our collective thinking about violence has been shaped largely by its media portrayals, where it appears in extreme and sensationalized forms: a family annihilated by one of its own members; horrific crimes committed by prison inmates; a teenager driven to suicide by online harassment. Yet, by focusing on such extreme horrors—highlighted on the front pages of newspapers and framed in quantitative rather than qualitative terms—we may in fact fail to grasp the true nature of violence. A rational philosophical analysis might reveal, perhaps to our surprise, that beyond the spectacular and grotesque, there exists also a silent, nearly imperceptible violence—dispersed over time and not always immediately qualifiable as evil (Filek, 2010, p. 7). What if, moreover, life itself were to contain an intrinsic element of violence—such that, to live, one must either exercise violence, or at the very least accept it? After all, the passage of time leads inevitably to aging and death—phenomena we do not willingly embrace. In this light, the efforts of medicine or the discipline of a healthy lifestyle might be interpreted as justified forms of violence against the adverse forces that resist life.

These preliminary reflections are not meant to relativize violence, but rather to redirect our attention toward less obvious forms in which it manifests. Our concern is not merely with lesser degrees of violence, but with a kind of violence that does not arise from intentional human action. Instead, it seems to be embedded in the very structure of reality itself—even in the natural world. In this essay, I aim to uncover this fundamental stratum of violence, which I shall call ontological. I am not proposing an ontology of violence, but rather an uncovering of the ontological dimension of violence—that is, its manifestation in the very foundations of Being.

Our guide in this inquiry will be Martin Heidegger. He not only diagnosed the dictatorship of the anonymous "They" (*das Man*)—"this is how one thinks, feels, and lives" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 114)—but went further, uncovering structures of violence at the very core of the natural world. This insight, in turn, enabled him to legitimize violence (another critical issue in the philosophy of violence) within the context of concrete institutional action—in his case, the administration of a university (Knowles, 2020,

p. 126). The aim of this article is thus to identify and discuss two fundamental levels at which violence becomes manifest in Heidegger's thought and praxis: the ontological level, as the structure of Being itself, and the ontic level, as the administrative practice of the university. Even when subjected to well-founded critique, Heidegger's analyses may significantly expand our understanding of the phenomenon of violence.

1. Outline of a Phenomenology of Violence

Violence first becomes intelligible where it is not yet a concept but an experience. It interrupts the familiarity of the lived world and fractures the elementary confidence with which one moves among things and others. What is broken is not only the body, nor even primarily the body, but the texture of relations: trust, proximity, recognition, the tacit expectation that the other will allow me to remain myself. Violence, therefore, does not merely add a painful event to an otherwise stable reality; it reorganizes reality. It changes what can be expected, what can be risked, and what can be said. In this sense, violence is disclosed as a disturbance of worldhood itself.

This disturbance is inseparable from embodiment and temporality. Violence inscribes itself in the body not only as injury but as a heightened exposure, a forced vigilance, a dispossession of ease. It also alters time: it accelerates, arrests, or repeats it; it makes the future precarious and the past intrusive. The experience of being violated thus reveals a peculiar kind of compulsion—an imposed passivity that cannot be reduced to a mere psychological state, because it affects the very way the world is given. Only on the basis of such phenomenological evidence does it become legitimate to ask whether violence is merely one class of actions among others, or whether it indicates a more fundamental dimension that belongs to existence as such.

Before turning to Heidegger's thought, it is worth situating this experiential core within the broader landscape of violence and highlighting the diversity of its forms and manifestations. Only against this background does the claim about an ontological dimension of violence become justified. As previously noted, violence—though universally condemned and intuitively recognizable—remains a phenomenon with a deeply complex and multilayered structure. In public discourse and everyday thinking, it is most often reduced to spectacular instances of physical aggression—those easily depicted, named, and condemned. A serious philosophical analysis of this phenomenon, however, requires us to move beyond simplified categories and the aesthetic of media images toward a reflection that understands violence not as a static fact but as a dynamic, event-like act, constituted by the relationship of at least two centers of will (Filek, 2010, p. 6). Violence, therefore, cannot be understood merely as physical force directed at the body, but rather as an act aimed at overpowering another's will—subordinating it, breaking it, excluding it, or reshaping it. What is primarily violated in violence is freedom—not as an abstract value, but as the concrete possibility for a subject to exist according to one's own convictions. In this sense, violence appears as a negation of another's freedom—and, simultaneously, as an unconscious recognition of that freedom, for only a free being can be subjected to violence. The very condition of violence is thus the possibility of resistance (Levinas, 1969, p. 18). Where resistance is absent, we encounter total domination—a condition that, paradoxically, may prove all the more destructive the more imperceptible it becomes and the more it takes on the appearance of voluntariness.

Contemporary analyses of violence therefore compel us to expand its concept to include less obvious forms: psychological, emotional, symbolic, linguistic, structural, or epistemic violence may not involve brutal physical means, and yet they can deeply violate the integrity of another. So-called theoretical violence—enacted through instruments of knowledge, cultural codes, rationalizations, and definitions—can also lead to objectification and subjugation (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 97–116). Particularly troubling are forms of violence that do not present themselves as violence at all, but operate under the guise of care, education, upbringing, or even therapy—when in reality, they represent an attempt to impose an existential project upon another subject (Žižek, 2008, pp. 8–9).

In this context, violence cannot be considered solely from an ethical or social perspective. It reveals an ontological dimension—not merely one form among others, but rather a primary and constitutive horizon (Drwięga, 2024, p. 54). Ontological violence does not result from human actions but is an immanent feature of human existence. The human being inevitably experiences a form of overpowering that arises not from without, but from the very structure of being: the passage of time, aging, illness, suffering, and death are events that occur independently of our will, and yet they occur within us and to us. This experience bears the mark of primordial violence:

it lacks a recognizable agent, and yet it strikes the subject in the most radical way (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 174–176).

In contrast to other forms of violence—interpersonal, institutional, symbolic—ontological violence is not intentional, but nonetheless possesses the structure of existential compulsion. Whereas social violence presupposes a subject and a goal, ontological violence unfolds on the level of fundamental human experience: being exposed to irreversibility, loss, and transience. This dimension marks a limit-point of human self-understanding, revealing that violence is not merely something one does or avoids, but something that constitutes the very condition of human existence (Knowles, 2020, p. 133).

Reflecting on ontological violence is necessary not only because of its universality and inevitability, but because only it enables a deeper understanding of all other forms. Physical, psychological, and institutional violence appear, in this light, as secondary responses to a prior experience of powerlessness. Violence inflicted upon others is often an unconscious reaction to a more primordial violence that resists identification: the violence of being, of time, of meaninglessness. What appears as a destructive act against another may, at its root, be a compensation for existential helplessness—a gesture of despair in the face of one's own finitude (Butler, 2004, pp. iii–iv).

From this perspective, ontological violence not only deserves attention—it should become the starting point of any serious reflection on violence as such. It shows that violence is not merely an ethical problem, but also an ontological and phenomenological one. Only through its analysis can we grasp the full meaning of overpowering as a phenomenon inscribed in the human condition. Ontological violence constitutes the matrix within which all other forms of violence find their place and significance—as evasions, as responses, as imitations, or displacements of the original experience of being overpowered by Being. At the same time, an ontological approach to violence enables a more adequate ethical evaluation of concrete acts of violence. Only against the background of the awareness that all freedom exists in the shadow of ontological violence can we truly discern the boundaries and conditions under which instrumental violence—aimed at the good of another—is ethically justifiable, not by its effectiveness or the intention of the agent, but by the responsibility assumed for the consequences of acting within a world already marked by fundamental violence (Agamben, 1998, p. 10).

Violence, then, is not primarily an act of force but an existential event. Its analysis requires a mode of thinking that reaches beyond moral and social categories to touch the very core of human existence. Ontological violence does not erase individuality; on the contrary—it reveals that individuality, as contingent and fragile, is constantly threatened, and it is precisely this vulnerability that makes it the most profound locus of violence. For this reason, reflection on ontological violence is not a supplement to sociological or ethical analysis, but the very condition of their possibility (Nancy, 1993, p. 85).

2. Ontological and Ontic

The two levels of analysis of violence in Heidegger's thought, outlined in the introduction, are not merely rhetorical. From the outset, the question of Being (*Sein*) constituted the "guiding idea" of Heidegger's philosophy, and the very premise of *Being and Time* arose from the experience of the "forgetfulness of Being" (*Seinsvergessenheit*). However, the turn toward the thinking of Being should not be understood as a transition to the study of a new object hitherto neglected, for Being is not a being (*Seiendes*); it does not "exist," it is no thing, and thus cannot become an object of inquiry in any straightforward manner. It is therefore no surprise that the central question for Heidegger became one of method: how is the thinking of Being possible at all? How is it experienced in philosophical reflection?

The very first sentence of *Being and Time* states that the question of Being "has today been forgotten" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 21). It is the task of thinking—whether called philosophy or metaphysics—to retrieve this question. Metaphysics, as Heidegger puts it, is a questioning that "goes beyond beings to inquire into their beingness, in order to bring them as a whole back into intelligibility" (Heidegger, 2008, p. 95). Yet, metaphysics has traditionally asked not about Being itself, but about beings as a whole—about what is, rather than what it means to be. As Heidegger's thought evolved, particularly in his later period, he increasingly distanced himself from the metaphysical tradition, recognizing that it is within metaphysics that the oblivion of Being manifests most clearly. For one cannot answer the question "Why are there beings at all, and not rather nothing?" without first understanding what it means for something to be. Being, in traditional metaphysics, fills the empty concept of beingness, yet metaphysics does not draw closer to the question of Being—it actually distances itself from it. It lacks the capacity to think Being as such. Since for Heidegger, "Being and thinking are the same" (a formulation influenced by Heraclitus), the search for Being must be undertaken within the history of thought itself—by reading in thought the extent to which it thinks that which is to be thought: namely, Being (Heidegger, 2000, p. 124).

This is what Heidegger calls "fundamental ontology." As he famously writes: "Any ontological inquiry, no matter how rich and tightly knit a system of categories it possesses, remains fundamentally blind and a perversion of its innermost intention, if the meaning of Being is not clarified beforehand with sufficient explicitness and if this clarification is not understood as its fundamental task" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 31). Ontology must therefore become the basis of metaphysics and enable its radical reinterpretation. Heidegger offers two visions of metaphysics: the first, which merely thinks beings without awareness of the ground of their being, and the second, which seeks to think Being itself. The first must be overcome by the second for metaphysics to fulfill its true vocation.

With the discovery of the so-called ontological difference—the distinction between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiendes*)—Heidegger introduces two levels of the disclosure of reality: the ontological and the ontic. Whereas the ontic pertains to beings and their properties, the ontological compels us to ask about the very way in which beings possess those properties—that is, about Being itself. Yet one must avoid the "hypostatization error," that is, the tendency to treat the ontological and ontic as two distinct entities. Even when metaphysics deals with beings as such, it does not inquire into its own essence. The essence of metaphysics is something other than metaphysics itself: it asks not about beings, but about Being and its meaning. Still, in asking about beings, metaphysics always already operates within an implicit experience of Being. It examines beings in the light of Being (for there is no other way to understand them), but it does not inquire into what this light itself is. "Whenever metaphysics responds to its own question about beings as such, it is preceded by the presentation of Being. It proclaims Being necessarily and thus constantly. Yet it does not let Being itself speak, because it does not think Being in its truth, and does not think truth as unconcealment, nor unconcealment in its essence" (Heidegger, 2008, p. 93). This reveals an important relation between ontology and the ontic—not one of separation, but of mutual implication. Thus, violence must be considered not only from both perspectives, but also in terms of the interplay between them.

Ontological violence, as it is used in what follows, does not designate a moral category, nor does it name a specific class of actions or agents. It should also not be confused with existential negativity as such, understood as finitude, vulnerability, or exposure. Rather, the term refers to a structural dimension of Being itself, insofar as Being discloses itself through forms of constraint, compulsion, and irreversibility that no subject can suspend or neutralize. In this sense, ontological violence names neither an ethical justification nor a metaphysical principle, but a condition under which existence is compelled to appear and to endure.

This conceptual distinction is crucial. To speak of ontological violence is not to hierarchize forms of violence or to relativize historical, political, or institutional harm by appealing to a deeper "ontological" level. On the contrary, the point of the distinction between ontological and ontic violence is to preserve the specificity of concrete practices and responsibilities, while at the same time accounting for the fact that such practices unfold within a horizon that is not ethically neutral. Ontological violence does not excuse ontic violence; it renders it intelligible as a possibility that emerges within the way Being itself is disclosed.

The focus of the present analysis will be the period between 1930 and 1936. These were particularly fertile years in Heidegger's philosophical development, bringing about significant shifts in his thinking. They were also the years of *Gleichschaltung* and Heidegger's intense involvement in bureaucratic and administrative functions. While his theoretical reflections brought new ontological insights, his administrative activity made manifest the foundational structures of violence within concrete institutional practice (Knowles, 2020, p. 126). Accordingly, this article aims to uncover and interpret the two planes on which violence is revealed in Heidegger's thought and life: the ontological, as a structure of Being, and the ontic, as its administrative embodiment within the university.

3. *Physis* as Walten

Heidegger's ontological investigations, initially undertaken through the analytic of *Dasein* (*Sein und Zeit*), gradually shifted—after his so-called

Kehre—toward a tracing of the history of Being (*Seinsgeschichte*), and in particular the obscuration and loss of the so-called “Great Inception” (*der Große Anfang*). Heidegger cautions against conflating this inception with the origins of European metaphysics: the latter—represented by Plato and Aristotle—signals, in his view, the very closure of what was once an originary unveiling (Heidegger, 2000, p. 12). During this transitional period, Heidegger explores a constellation of primordial Greek terms: *physis*, *aletheia*, *lethe*, *nous*, *mythos*, *poiesis*, *techne*, *doxa*, and *pseudos*. Through his often idiosyncratic interpretations, these concepts mark out an ontological topography in which Being can be thought not as an object, but as an event (*Ereignis*).

At the center of this rethinking stands the concept of *physis*, which Heidegger understands as the primal manifestation of Being itself. *Physis*, he insists, is not to be equated with nature in the modern, mechanistic sense, but rather denotes “the emerging abiding sway” (*das aufgehend verweilende Walten*) (Heidegger, 1991, p. 206). In this interpretation, *physis* is not a static noun but an active event: it names the process of emergence, the upsurge from concealment, and the dynamic process by which beings become present. As Heidegger writes, “physis is the fundamental Greek word for Being itself, in the sense of self-unfolding presence” (Heidegger, 2000, p. 14).

Heidegger traces two etymological roots for *physis*: one from *phyesthai* (to grow, to arise), suggesting an unfolding toward the fullness of essence; the other from *phainesthai* (to appear, to shine forth), suggesting a process of radiant manifestation. He insists that both roots are essentially intertwined (Heidegger, 2000, pp. 14–16). Thus, he famously defines physis as “the emerging sway that abides” (*das aufgehend verweilende Walten*) (Heidegger, 1991, p. 206).

In *physis*, beings emerge not by accident but as gifts—given, as it were, from out of nothingness. Such a view collapses traditional dualisms: there is no longer a firm boundary between nature and art, the physical and the spiritual, the natural and the historical. All these realms are enveloped by *physis*, even divinity itself. Heidegger polemicizes against the Latin translation of physis as *natura*, calling it a violent misreading of the original Greek sense. “It was not natural processes,” he writes, “that first led the Greeks to experience *physis*, but rather a poetic-thinking experience of Being itself” (Heidegger, 2000, p. 16). Accordingly, *physis* is better understood through analogy with *poiesis*, the emergence of form through creative struggle. Drawing from Heraclitus, Heidegger stresses that *polemos* (strife) is the generative force of world-disclosure. *Polemos* is not war in the human sense, but a primordial strife whereby opposites unfold, allowing entities to find their essence, place, and unity. "The world comes to be through confrontation" (*Im Auseinandersetzen west die Welt*) (Heidegger, 2000, p. 67). This struggle does not destroy unity—it constitutes it. Unity (*logos*) is only possible where multiplicity arises through tension.

It is within this interpretive framework that Heidegger introduces the concept of *Walten*, first in his *Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik* (1929–30), as an ontological term capable of translating *physis* (Heidegger, 1995, pp. 113–118). Over time, *Walten* becomes surrounded by a semantic constellation: *durchwalten*, *obwalten*, *umwalten*, *verwalten*, überwältigen, *vorwalten*, *Gewalt*, *Vergewaltigung*, and *Erwalten*. These terms gesture toward ruling, prevailing, overpowering, administering, and even violating. The German verb *walten*, historically rooted in Old High German *waltan* (8th century), evolved to mean "to rule," "to have dominion," "to govern," but also "to care" (*sorgen*) (DWDS, 2025). Its semantic field thus oscillates between *Macht* (power), *Gewalt* (violence), and *Sorge* (care).

This ambivalence is not accidental. *Walten* is not merely domination; it names the inner law of *physis*, the elemental force of Being itself. Unlike *techne*, which produces artifacts, *physis* is the unmediated unfolding of what is. In this light, Heidegger reveals an ontological structure of violence (*Gewalt*): *Walten* is not a human power, but a force into which humans are attuned through poetic thinking and linguistic resonance (Knowles, 2020, p. 132).

This ontological interpretation of violence has been subjected to a fundamental critique in twentieth-century continental philosophy. Emmanuel Levinas, most notably in *Totality and Infinity*, argues that any attempt to ground alterity within the horizon of Being risks reducing the Other to a moment of ontological order, thereby neutralizing the asymmetry of responsibility that precedes ontology itself (Levinas, 1969). From a different angle, Jacques Derrida has shown that violence is not an accidental distortion of metaphysical thinking but is structurally inscribed in its very gesture of conceptual totalization, as he famously argues in *Violence and Metaphysics* (Derrida, 1978). Read in light of these critiques, *Walten* cannot be treated as a philosophically innocent description of the dynamics of Being: its ontological power is inseparable from the risk of normalizing *Gewalt* by presenting it as an intrinsic feature of reality rather than as a disruption that calls for ethical resistance.

Language (*Sprache*) itself becomes the privileged locus of *Walten*. As Heidegger writes in *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, language is "what rules in the relation of humanness to the twofold [*Zwiefalt*] and sustains it" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 123). This "twofold" may be understood as the ontological difference between Being and beings. Authentic language, spoken poetically (*dichtend*), speaks according to and through the sway of Being. To speak authentically is not to name domination, but to allow it to shine forth untrammeled. Poets—and thinkers—are tasked with translating this dominion into clarity without violating its mystery (Heidegger, 1971, p. 126).

This primal sway is a force to which humans must attune, even when technological forces strive to overcome it. In the *Black Notebooks*, Heidegger speaks of "the struggle to free the ungraspable" (*kämpferische Freigabe des Unbegreifbaren*) (Heidegger, 2014, p. 29). On the threshold of his rectorate, he ties this poetic guardianship of Being to an administrative task: "The philosopher is never one who grounds; rather, he projects ahead and stands there, clarifying questioning and aiming at the rigor of the concept, thus administering (*verwalten*) the space-time of free poetizing toward the grounding of man in earth–work–struggle and descent" (Heidegger, 2014, p. 82). This passage should not be read metaphorically. It ushers us into the second plane of *Walten*: not only the ontological sway of physis, but the ontic sphere of administrative practice—*Verwalten*. The very vocabulary of governance, organization, and dominion is rooted in the ontological *Walten* of Being itself. Thus, the task of thinking must also unfold through the bureaucratic, institutional, and historical dimensions of reality. Heidegger's engagement with *Verwalten* during his rectorate years illustrates how *Walten*, far from being an abstract philosophical principle, becomes incarnate in praxis.

The relation between *Walten* and *Verwalten* should therefore not be understood as a logical derivation or an ontological necessity. *Walten* does not "produce" administrative practices, nor does it prescribe political or institutional action. Rather, it provides a semantic and symbolic reservoir within which practices of governance, organization, and control can acquire philosophical legitimacy and appear as responses to an allegedly deeper historical or ontological mandate. This ontological perspective does not, however, suspend or relativize responsibility for ontic forms of violence. The fact that violence can be analyzed as a structural dimension of Being does not absolve concrete practices of domination, exclusion, or destruction from historical and ethical judgment. Ontological analysis can illuminate conditions of possibility, but it cannot replace accountability for actions that occur in specific institutional, political, and historical contexts.

4. Governance as a Philosophical Practice

The German philosophical tradition, perhaps more than any other current of Western philosophy, is a distinctive product of the university system. Herbert Schnädelbach succinctly captures this in *German Philosophy 1831–1933*: "German academic teaching is bureaucratic teaching [*Beamtenwissenschaft*]" (Schnädelbach, 1984, p. 23; Knowles, 2020, p. 125). In other words, German university instruction, including philosophy, has always been bound up with a specific form of administration—namely, the bureaucratic structure of the professor as a civil servant. German philosophy is a philosophy administered according to specific rules, a discipline that flourished within the particular context of administrative practices. And Heidegger, despite his ambitions to reform the German university, remained an unwavering product of that very system.

From April 1933 to April 1934, Heidegger held a significant bureaucratic post as *rector-F*ührer of the University of Freiburg. Archival material from the Rectorate confirms that he was a conscientious, detail-oriented, and efficiently functioning state official, capable of negotiating among rival factions within the regime. Moreover, Heidegger consistently emphasized his position within the cultural politics of National Socialism and developed a research agenda deeply entangled with Nazi promotion of regional studies (*Heimatkunde*) and Nazi philhellenism. Throughout the Nazi period, philosophy as a discipline was notably active in the administrative restructuring of the German university system. Three universities were brought into *Gleichschaltung* with philosophers as rectors: Heidegger in Freiburg, Ernst Krieck in Frankfurt and Heidelberg, and Hans Heyse in Königsberg. In Berlin as well, numerous philosophers took part in educational governance, including Alfred Baeumler. Among the many ambitious professors seeking to influence the administration of higher education in Nazi Germany, Heidegger arguably enjoyed the greatest postwar reputation. It is therefore a legitimate question:

did Heidegger possess a philosophy of administration (*Verwaltungsphilosophie*)? Was administration for him a philosophical practice?

Illuminating this question are the first four volumes of Heidegger's philosophical notebooks, the *Black Notebooks* (*Schwarze Hefte*), which reveal that Heidegger conceived the administration of the university as a philosophical task, one tied to the exercise of power and to the key term *Walten*. Although Heidegger sought to control the narrative regarding his relation to National Socialism and to deflect attention from his administrative role (*Verwaltung*) at the university—what he once called the "violence of administration" (*Gewalt der Verwaltung*)—the *Black Notebooks* nevertheless offer crucial insights into what we might call his "philosophy" of administration.

The *Black Notebooks*, however, cannot be treated as a transparent window onto "deep ontology." They are also a rhetorical site of self-interpretation, where Heidegger fashions a vocabulary capable of redescribing concrete institutional and political involvement in categories of destiny, historical necessity, and "essential" violence. Precisely for this reason, the conceptual density of terms such as *Walten*, *Gewalt*, and *Verwaltung* must be handled with methodological caution: they may articulate an ontological claim, but they may also function as a strategy of legitimation and, retrospectively, of self-exculpation. In what follows, I therefore read Heidegger's administrative lexicon both as philosophically operative and as historically situated discourse—one that can illuminate the translation of ontological motifs into institutional practice without dissolving responsibility into the supposedly impersonal sway of Being.

This critical perspective has been articulated with particular force by Cezary Wodziński, whose book *Heidegger and the Problem of Evil* offers one of the most sustained analyses of the entanglement between Heidegger's ontology and the problem of historical violence. Wodziński argues that the appeal to the history of Being risks transforming concrete acts of exclusion, domination, and destruction into moments of an allegedly impersonal ontological destiny, thereby suspending the question of responsibility in favor of a quasi-metaphysical narrative of error and necessity (Wodziński, 2016). While my approach does not adopt this diagnosis in its strongest form, Wodziński's critique remains crucial insofar as it exposes the philosophical danger inherent in any attempt to read political or institutional practices directly from ontological structures. Precisely for this reason, the present analysis treats the relation between Walten and administrative governance not as a deduction or justification, but as a problematic translation of ontological motifs into practices that remain fully subject to historical and ethical judgment.

There is no doubt that Heidegger attached specific hopes to the emergence of the National Socialist state. These hopes concerned—in general terms—the overcoming of modernity and the creation of conditions for a new beginning, a proper realization of the history of Being (*Seynsgeschichte*). In his visions, Heidegger employed many of the same terms as the National Socialists: race, nation, history, power, Germany. However, he sought to endow these terms with meanings different from those circulating in the ideological discourse, believing he had arrived at their authentic essence. Initially, he may have naively believed that the practical force of National Socialism would facilitate their true realization, without fully grasping its destructive character. The *Black Notebooks* do not refute Karlfried Grünn's or Otto Pöggeler's conclusion that Heidegger harbored the naive hope of being "the leader of the leader" (*den Führer führen*) (Pöggeler, 1987, chap. 8). While they do not contain new sensational revelations about Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism, their novelty lies in a more sustained attempt to situate Nazism within the broader ontological-historical context of Being. At the outset, Nazism appeared to Heidegger as an opportunity, a way out of the impasses into which modern philosophical thought—and modern civilization with it—had maneuvered itself. He believed that only the Germans, like the Greeks of old, were capable of initiating a new beginning for human thought, one that could liberate Europe and the world from the ruinous effects of metaphysical thinking and the narrow ideologies of rationalism and liberalism (Wolin, 1990, pp. 96–108).

Heidegger believed that the National Socialist revolution would transform the German university into a "space-time of free poetizing" (*Raum-Zeit des freien Dichtens*) (Heidegger, 2014, p. 82), a site for the restoration of "the ruling world of the German" (*die waltende Welt des Deutschen*) (p. 55), and would re-establish the abyss between speaking to power and speaking with power by reinstituting what he termed "the violence of simplicity" (*Gewalt der Einfachheit*) (p. 46), thus preserving the "silent essential violence of things" (*die Stille Wesensgewalt der Dinge*) (p. 47). The preservation of this dominion, the violence of Being, was not only the task of thought (ontology) but also of administration (philosophical praxis).

In the *Black Notebooks*, Heidegger describes his rectorship in terms of *Gewalttat* (act of violence) and *Verwaltung* (administration). He characterizes National Socialism itself as an act of violence, justified insofar as it was a response to a prior act of violence: "a brutal cowardice before Being" (*brutale Feigheit vor dem Sein*) (Heidegger, 2015, p. 376). This gives rise to the intriguing problem of how Heidegger translated the ontological structure of *Walten* into the concrete political practice of university administration as a form of ontic violence.

Although Heidegger later claimed before the Denazification Committee that friends persuaded him to assume the rectorship, the committee's report indicates that Heidegger had been in contact with the Ministry of Culture in Berlin weeks before his appointment. Following the enactment of the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service on 7 April 1933, *Gleichschaltung* began in German universities, and Heidegger's task as rector was to purge the University of Jews and politically undesirable faculty. He adapted to his bureaucratic role with remarkable zeal. Documents signed on 19 April 1933 show him energetically implementing antisemitic measures at the professorial level (*Lehrstuhl*). By 28 April 1933, when he issued a decree requiring deans to "fully and clearly implement the measures of 7 April," almost all Jewish professors had been removed.

In the sections of the *Black Notebooks* devoted to his rectorship, Heidegger describes the period in ontic terms: "A time is breaking in which all powers and institutions, all strivings and standards will be melted into a single whole" (*Eine Zeit bricht an, in der alle Gewalten und Einrichtungen, alle Strebungen und Maßstäbe eingeschmolzen werden*) (Heidegger, 2014, p. 178). Key terms here are *Gewalten* (powers) and *Einrichtungen* (institutions), which must, of course, be properly governed.

Heidegger also reflects on the term *Führerwille* (will to lead), contrasting it with *Geltungstrieb* (drive for dominance). While the dominant leader seeks recognition and praise, the one who truly leads finds fulfillment in the task itself. Yet the qualities Heidegger ascribes to the drive for dominance are striking: "It requires: administrative solidity, negotiating dexterity, lightness before great questions and tasks, joy in enterprise, and a certain ability to run with the wolves" (p. 139). Though one might be tempted to read Heidegger as opposing *Geltungstrieb* in favor of *Führerwille*, he seems rather to describe an ideal administrator as someone who integrates both (Bambach, 2003, pp. 78–80). Contemporary witnesses, like Adolf Lampe—an economist from Freiburg, Auschwitz survivor, and member of the Denazification Commission—observed that Heidegger defended his positions with "fanatical and terrorist intolerance," invoking the political strength of the party in his defense.

Heidegger understood that any movement aiming to revolutionize institutions and structures would require capable administrators—a theme explicit in his infamous rectoral address, "The Self-Assertion of the German University" (27 May 1933) (Heidegger, 1990). This interpretation is confirmed by a post-rectorship reflection, where Heidegger deepens his philosophical engagement with administration: "World-worlding occurs in the world-constituting, opening, coordinating violence of administration—care" (*Weltweltung geschieht in der erweltenden, eröffnenden fügenden Gewalt der Verwaltung – Sorge*) (Heidegger, 2014, p. 211). By linking administration with care (*Sorge*), one of the central concepts of *Being and Time*, Heidegger points to the ontological complexity of administration within his thought. Administration opens the space of dominion by forcefully eliminating obstacles to its dominance. In other words, for administration to triumph, it must clear a space and remove impediments through a force requiring the dominance of administrative will.

In the fourth volume of the *Black Notebooks*, Heidegger reflects on the failure of the rectorship, again emphasizing his administrative capacities. A recurring phrase throughout is the "true error" (*der eigentliche Fehler*) of the rectorship. He offers a variation: "People will not soon grasp what was truly decisive in my 1933 decision, which nonetheless turned out to be a mistake—not for the reasons just mentioned, but in regard to the possibility within National Socialism, and to the moment and suitability of a thinker for administrative action in an institution of public education" (Heidegger, 2015, p. 127). Heidegger laments the timing and wonders whether, as a thinker, he was unsuited to the task—though archival evidence hardly supports such self-doubt. In retrospect, Heidegger judged his rectorship as an administrative failure. In any case, National Socialism disappointed him. But what exactly did he expect?

Conclusions

Even if the concept of *Verwalten* (governing, administering) did not attain the status of a fundamental term in Heidegger's thought, *Walten* most certainly did. It seems justified to juxtapose and compare these two notions based on Heidegger's own philosophical practice. What, then, do these analyses reveal about the nature of violence itself?

First, for Heidegger, violence has primarily an ontological meaning and should not be attributed any immediate axiological connotation. It is not about war, aggression, or mutual combat, but about a force that manifests within Being itself—making it visible. In this sense, violence can even be considered positive: becoming aware of it enables a more attuned comportment toward reality. *Logos*, for Heidegger, is the gathering of opposites—but would such gathering be possible without first recognizing alterity itself, that is, *polemos*? At the heart of reality lies differentiation, which always implies opposition. *Physis*, when understood as *Walten*, is the force that maintains harmony through sovereign sway. Belonging-together and opposition coalesce. In such an experience of Being, conflict and strife (*polemos*) are constitutive elements (Heidegger, 2000, pp. 65–67). This demonstrates a deep Heraclitean influence, especially in the affirmation that "war is the father of all things." However, these concepts should be interpreted in their original Greek context—not simplistically as a struggle for survival, nor dialectically as truth emerging from tension. *Polemos* pertains to Being itself, designating an original, originary "concealing unconcealment." *Physis*, then, is a "polemic harmony" (Heidegger, 2000, p. 74).

If anything approaches the modern understanding of violence—characterized by a negative axiological valence—it would be, for Heidegger, *technē*. Technology embodies the mindset of domination. In a 1937 lecture, Heidegger elaborated the contrast between *physis* and *technē*: "This is what *technē* means: to apprehend beings as arising from themselves in the way in which they show themselves (…), to organize oneself [*sich einrichten*] within beings as a whole through production and institutions. *Technē* is a mode of proceeding against *physis*, not yet in order to overpower [überwältigen] or exploit it (...), but rather to maintain the sovereign sway [*Walten*] of *physis* in unconcealment" (Heidegger, 1998, p. 145). Technology configures nature as totality—not as an object, but as *Bestand*, a standing-reserve of resources, a stockpile of energies (Heidegger, 1977, pp. 17–22).

Although Heidegger later referred to his rectorship as a mistake (*Irrtum*), one must ask whether this judgment carries only empirical significance—concerning a historical episode—or rather an ontological significance, involving a rejection of the idea of philosophy as administration, as a "bureaucratic science" (*Beamtenwissenschaft*). Yet *Irrtum* can also be read as a retrospective rhetorical device that shifts the focus from responsibility for concrete decisions to the alleged mismatch between a thinker and an institution. Heidegger felt responsible for "safeguarding" the fundamental structure of *Walten* in praxis, which became for him *Verwalten*. Philosophy is not limited to a disinterested search for the truth of Being; instead, the truth as *aletheia* possesses a structure that calls for practical safeguarding, adaptation, and attunement. The philosopher-administrator serves this truth, akin to a poet who speaks with force (*mit Gewalt*) (Bambach, 2003, pp. 192–195). Heidegger's remarks on the supposed unsuitability of the philosopher for administrative activity seem to be merely a defensive strategy. He deeply believed that philosophy ought to be pursued in the university mode, that is, within the bureaucratic-administrative machinery of the modern university.

The postwar fate of Heidegger may offer further insight. These remarks on the contemporary university are intended not as a sociological diagnosis or an empirical analysis of academic institutions, but as a philosophical reflection on structural continuities in the language and logic of administration that shape how such institutions understand and legitimize themselves. Heidegger was profoundly attached to his reputation and invested great effort into rehabilitating it. Yet he was an exception in receiving the support of internationally recognized scholars. Nearly all German academics involved in National Socialism were expelled from academic life after the war. If Heidegger's rehabilitation succeeded, it may be because something in his thought continues to satisfy the inner demands of university philosophy. What made Heidegger so valuable to postwar universities? Why did he prove indispensable to our "administered thinking" (*verwaltetes Denken*)—to borrow a phrase from the Frankfurt School (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 232)? Perhaps, indeed, *Verwalten* is alive and well in the contemporary university.

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Metaphysics as a Source of Violence in the Thought of Gianni Vattimo

Keywords: Vattimo, weak thought, hermeneutics, metaphysics, violence

Słowa kluczowe: Vattimo, myśl słaba, hermeneutyka, metafizyka, przemoc

Abstract

This article presents an interpretation of the phenomenon of violence in the philosophy of Gianni Vattimo. The main thesis of the article is that, for Vattimo, metaphysics—understood as the belief in the existence of absolutely true and final interpretations—constitutes the fundamental, if not exclusive, source of violence. The appropriate remedy for metaphysical violence is his hermeneutics, articulated as "weak thought" (*pensiero debole*). The article distinguishes three contexts in which Vattimo addresses violence: the theoretical, the contemporary-historical, and the practical-political. It demonstrates how, starting from general theoretical concepts such as Being as an event or the *Verwindung* of metaphysics, Vattimo develops specific diagnoses of contemporary reality and the violence present within it, while deriving ethical and political implications for human practice.

Introduction

The Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo developed a distinctive conception of postmodern hermeneutic philosophy, drawing primarily on Nietzsche (notably the concept of nihilism expressed in the thesis of the death of God, marking the collapse of ultimate foundations and the transformation of reality into a fable), Heidegger (the end of metaphysics, the history of Being, and Being as an event), and Gadamer, whose philosophical hermeneutics emphasizes the historicity and linguistic nature of understanding (Vattimo, 1988, 1997, 2017).

Vattimo does not directly engage with the phenomenological tradition and is therefore not typically regarded as one of its representatives. When he does refer to phenomenology, he most often invokes Husserl critically, treating phenomenology—insofar as it seeks transcendental foundations and original givenness—as belonging to the metaphysical tradition (Vattimo, 1988, 1997). However, given that the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Heidegger is fundamentally phenomenological—in that it reworks the phenomenological attitude and the slogan “back to the things themselves” (Gadamer, 2004; Heidegger, 2010)—the phenomenological dimension of Vattimo’s thought can be located in its hermeneutic orientation.

Vattimo’s point of departure is the experience of the contemporary world, understood not as a set of pure data of consciousness but as always already mediated by history and language. Accordingly, an objective, presuppositionless, phenomenological description of what appears is replaced by a hermeneutic interpretation, in which the human participant is already situated and involved (Vattimo, 2021). For Vattimo, the being of things themselves consists in interpretations (Vattimo, 2017, 2021). His phenomenological-ontological motto —“there are no facts, only interpretations—and this too is only an interpretation”— captures this position (Vattimo, 1997, 2017).

The main aim of this article is to provide a systematic account of Vattimo’s interpretation of the phenomenon of violence, a topic not yet comprehensively addressed in the literature. This involves outlining the key theses, assumptions, theoretical significance, and limitations of his position. Since Vattimo does not present a unified theory of violence, this account requires reconstructing dispersed remarks and integrating distinct strands of his thought.

Vattimo’s interpretation of violence is noteworthy because it moves from general ontological claims—such as Being as an event and the *Verwindung* of metaphysics—to concrete diagnoses of contemporary reality and the violence present within it, while articulating corresponding ethical and political implications. The central thesis is that metaphysics constitutes a fundamental, if not exclusive, source of violence, and that its appropriate remedy is hermeneutics, specifically in the postmodern form Vattino developed. Accordingly, three contexts of violence in Vattimo's philosophy—theoretical, contemporary-historical, and practical-political— will be identified and analyzed in turn to substantiate this claim.

1. The Theoretical Context of Violence

1.1. Metaphysics as a Source of Violence

The theoretical context of violence concerns metaphysics and hermeneutics as interpretations of Being. In his understanding of metaphysics, Vattimo follows Heidegger, conceiving it as a philosophical project aimed at attaining knowledge of the ultimate, immutable foundations of objective reality, that is, the pursuit of absolute truth (Vattimo, 1988; Heidegger, 1998, 2010). Metaphysical thinking seeks to subjugate reality by uncovering its first principles and subjecting it to human control. Regardless of its particular form or method—whether intuitive insight, deductive reasoning, their synthesis, or an interpretation of history in terms of providence or teleology—metaphysical thought invariably claims universal validity (Vattimo, 1988, 1997, 2017).

Vattimo, however, does not limit metaphysics to the philosophical tradition alone. For him, metaphysics encompasses all dogmatic positions and discourses—scientific, political, and religious—that assert an unquestionable, absolutely true interpretation and the objective order of reality and seek to establish ultimate foundations or principles (Vattimo, 1997, 2017, 2021). Metaphysics also extends to social and political phenomena, mechanisms, and structures that are the product of such metaphysical positions.

Given Vattimo's distance from metaphysics understood in the above sense, his account of violence seeks to avoid any metaphysical, essentialist, or naturalistic elements. According to him, violence does not lie in the violation of an objective, natural order or a moral law (Vattimo, 2002, 2003). Rather, violence is fundamentally interpretative: it consists in infringing a person's freedom to propose or recognize alternative interpretations to the dominant one (Vattimo, 1997, 2003, 2017). Violence arises where pluralism of interpretations is limited and interpretive freedom constrained. Since, for Vattimo, only interpretations exist, interpretative violence reveals what violence is in general. Metaphysics, by its nature, is the source of such interpretative violence. Its inherently violent character lies in its claim to an absolutely true interpretation corresponding to objective reality (Vattimo, 1988, 1997, 2017). This leads to the interruption of hermeneutic dialogue, the silencing of others, and the imposition of a single allegedly correct interpretation (Vattimo, 1997, 2003, 2017). Where ultimate truth appears, open and free discussion ceases; such truth can only be passively accepted.

Understood in this broad sense, metaphysics constitutes, for Vattimo, the primary and most significant source of violence. One may even argue that, in Vattimo's thought, metaphysics functions as a universal source. All forms of violence—symbolic, religious, psychological, or physical, whether individual or collective—would be forms of interpretative violence stemming from a metaphysical position and worldview. These forms of violence involve the metaphysical act of depriving others of the right to speak or hold their own views.[1]

Therefore, the metaphysical character of violence to which Vattimo refers does not require explicit claims to absolute truth or objective reality. It is already present in the assumption of the unquestionability, self-evidence, or dogmatic superiority of one's own interpretation, including those serving particular interests—economic, class-based, social, or personal—over all others. For Vattimo, the justification of such absolutization presupposes metaphysical assumptions (Vattimo, 2003, 2017, 2021). In this sense, metaphysical understanding of conceptions of truth, subjectivity, reality, rationality, and other traditionally philosophical notions constitute a horizon within which violence becomes possible, intelligible, normal, or even necessary. Colonial violence, for example—an expression of the economic interests of the middle classes in Western European societies—can be understood as rooted in the acceptance of an absolute ontological division between categories such as

[1] The position advanced here—that for Vattimo, physical violence is one of many forms of interpretative, metaphysical violence—is not universally accepted in the literature. Harris (2012), for instance, objects to this view, arguing that although Vattimo brings these two forms of violence into close proximity, he does not identify them with one another. However, Harris does not offer any alternative, non-metaphysical and non-naturalistic account of physical violence that would remain consistent with the premises of weak thought. The strong, absolute distinction between interpretative and physical violence, that he appears to propose is at odds with both the letter of Vattimo's texts and the spirit of weak thought.

"civilized" Western citizens and the "savage" indigenous populations of colonized territories. Such metaphysical categories make it possible to interpret economic interests in ways that override the freedom and rights of colonized peoples, thereby legitimizing and sustaining colonial violence.

1.2. Weak Thought as a Remedy for Metaphysical Violence

The remedy for metaphysical violence in the theoretical context is an alternative hermeneutic interpretation of Being, which Vattimo terms "weak thought" (*pensiero debole*) (Vattimo, 1997, 2014, 2017). According to weak thought, Being does not simply "be" but "happens" (Vattimo, 1988, 1997, 2017). It is neither a stable, immutable substance or structure nor a ready-made object awaiting discovery. Instead, it is a historical and linguistic event occurring through interpretation, in which human beings participate (Vattimo, 1988, 1997, 2017). Being has a processual character and remains open to further interpretations. Central to this view is the Heideggerian concept of the history of Being, which Vattimo understands as a process through which Being opens variable and provisional horizons of disclosure of beings and human existence (Vattimo, 1988, 1997). Being can therefore no longer serve as an ultimate foundation of reality sought by metaphysics. Consequently, concepts such as substance, or reality lose their epistemological role as metaphysical foundations. Being, in this sense, is "weak" (Vattimo, 1997, 2017, 2019), a designation meaningful only in contrast to metaphysical notions of fundamentality and presence.

The weakening of Being entails recognizing the radically interpretative character of things themselves and truth: they exist only *in* and *through* interpretations, which are always historically, culturally, and linguistically situated (Vattimo, 1997, 2017, 2021). Thus, there is no single absolutely true interpretation. Nor are there interpretations that adequately reflect a pre-given object, since the object of interpretation is not a ready-made entity existing independently in the outside world, and interpretation is not an external act of knowing. Rather, things themselves are constituted and transformed within interpretation (Vattimo, 2021). It is therefore more appropriate to speak of a multiplicity of non-final, true interpretations in which Being and things themselves occur.

In this way, Vattimo's hermeneutics eliminates the theoretical basis for metaphysical violence. From the standpoint of weak thought, metaphysics becomes merely one possible interpretation among many, and an untenable one: its claim to absolute truth contradicts the event-like character of weak Being and presupposes a transhistorical, absolute standpoint that is impossible given human finitude. Within the framework of weak thought, such interpretative violence thus remains only a theoretically ungrounded and unjustifiable—epistemologically and ethically—irrational temptation (Vattimo, 2003).

1.3. Vattimo's Metaphilosophical Self-Awareness

However, might weak thought itself be metaphysical? Vattimo acknowledges this risk and emphasizes that hermeneutics, if it is to avoid reverting to metaphysics, cannot present itself as a true description of an unchanging structure of reality or as a revelation of absolute truth about the interpretative nature of human existence and Being (Vattimo, 1997, 2003, 2017). Hermeneutics is not a form of cultural or historical relativism that uncovers multiple perspectives as an objective fact, thereby remaining within a metaphysical framework.[2] Rather, hermeneutics itself hold the status of yet another historical interpretation (Vattimo, 1997, 2003, 2017, 2021). It can offer only rhetorically persuasive arguments, presenting itself as the best possible response to the challenges of contemporary times and the historical legacy we have inherited (Vattimo, 1997, 2003, 2021).

Weak thought is therefore indispensable for ensuring that the critique of metaphysical violence does not itself become metaphysical. This means that it must not be conducted in the name of another supposed absolute truth, even if presented as non-metaphysical. Nor should it eliminate limits on interpretive conflict between individuals, thereby culminating in a state of universal violence manifesting as a war of all against all, where the sole aim is domination through the imposition of one's interpretation upon others (Vattimo, 2016). For Vattimo, such a critique of metaphysics,

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[2] The thought of hermeneutic philosophers—from Heidegger through Gadamer to Vattimo—is consistently marked by a rejection of relativism as a position that is essentially itself metaphysical, rooted in the assumptions of the metaphysics of presence (Gadamer, 2004, 2016; Heidegger, 2010). The tradition of hermeneutic philosophy can be understood as an attempt to move beyond the opposition between metaphysics and relativism, or, as Bernstein (1983) puts it, beyond the alternative marked by "Cartesian anxiety" between certain knowledge and the threat of relativism.

leading to further interpretative violence, would undermine its own purpose (2016). The grounding of the critique of violence in hermeneutic ontology is therefore essential.

Accordingly, it should be emphasized that Vattimo is fully aware of the metaphilosophical status of his own interpretation of violence. He does not propose an absolute or uniquely true account that claims to exhaust the meaning of violence or define its unchanging essence. On the basis of his own theses, his interpretation can—and should—be confronted with alternative accounts of violence and supplemented by other approaches, such as materialist or phenomenological ones, which may illuminate different aspects of the phenomenon and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of it. Like any interpretation, Vattimo's conception of violence presupposes a finite horizon of meaning that guides its development. In his case, this horizon is constituted by the relation between violence and metaphysics and by the aim of reducing violence or weakening metaphysical residues in contemporary reality. Vattimo would therefore not claim that his interpretation is the only possible or definitive account of violence. He would argue, however, that it is persuasive insofar as it discloses how violence operates in the contemporary world, identifies its historical sources, and promotes the reduction of violence.

1.4. The Interpretative Character of Violence (Example of Pain)

It should be noted that Vattimo's position is not reductive. He does not reduce the phenomenon of violence to the linguistic dimension alone, but rejects the idea of a "pure" fact of violence given in immediate self-evidence. Violence is always mediated by language and history. Accordingly, acts of violence are recognized and evaluated as such within specific horizons of meaning and historical narratives. When Vattimo emphasizes the interpretive character of violence, he does not thereby seek to dematerialize it or to reduce it to a merely semantic practice of imposing meanings. On the contrary, he consistently acknowledges that violence also has material, physical, and institutional dimensions (Vattimo, 2003, 2010a, 2021), which do not disappear or become negligible simply because violence is articulated through interpretation, but rather are constituted through it. Within Vattimo's hermeneutics, violence therefore occurs in reality, and is experienced, for example, as suffering and physical coercion; yet these occurrences and experiences are not independent of interpretation. Rather, they are inseparable from interpretative mediation.

This can be illustrated through Vattimo's interpretation of physical pain in "Pain and Metaphysics" (*Nihilism & Emancipation*) (Vattimo, 2003). Vattimo is neither concerned with providing a phenomenological description of the bodily dimension of pain, nor solely with the social and political mechanisms that condition its occurrence and management. Instead, he concentrates on a critique of the metaphysical understanding of pain as a source of violence and proposes an alternative account that avoids metaphysical assumptions. More specifically, Vattimo criticizes as metaphysical those positions that attribute to pain an immanent meaning or value, according to which suffering is understood as a path to truth, knowledge, or virtue, or as a form of expiation for sins. For Vattimo, such metaphysical theses, far from remaining on the level of abstract theory, translate directly into concrete social practices surrounding pain, increasing its acceptance and justification in the name of a higher truth: "the exaltation of pain and sanctification of suffering is no more than a (usually blatantly authoritarian) claim to be in touch with some foundation that, being absolute, can only perpetuate (as asceticism, as punishment, as the search for putative authenticity) the violence of which pain is the manifestation, the effect, and the cause" (Vattimo, 2003, p. 77). One example of this logic can be found in the reluctance to administer painkillers during and after medical procedures: "These [metaphysical—A.N.] abstractions epitomize and condition many of the practical and medical ways of treating pain, in private relationships and in institutional settings. Anyone who underwent a surgical procedure thirty years ago, let's say, knows how reluctant the nurses were to administer the smallest dose of painkiller […] the attitude of acceptance, indeed, endorsement of pain that prevailed even among people who were no longer formally religious" (Vattimo, 2003, pp. 72–73).

Consequently, the alternative, "weak" approach to pain requires acknowledging pain as a manifestation of human mortality and finitude, which does not confront us with any form of infinity or transcendent being. Pain in itself is thus deprived of any deeper meaning and appears rather as a purely contingent event that befalls us without our wishing for it. Accordingly, there are no grounds for maintaining reservations against its reduction. As Vattimo states: "pain and death […] are both insuperable and irredeemable. They are beyond explanation or justification because they give no access to truer truth; instead, they are what set us free from slavery and resentment vis-à-vis any truer truth (a law of Being, God as creator or judge, baleful destiny) […] pain has no dignity, it merits no respect as such […] Faced with pain, there is nothing else to do, nothing reasonable, except to try to eliminate it" (Vattimo, 2003, p. 75). At the same time, pain situates us within a community of mortals who share a condition of vulnerability and like ourselves, must confront suffering (Vattimo, 2003). The phenomenon of pain thus poses an ethical challenge: the obligation to reduce the suffering of others.

This example shows that Vattimo does not dissolve physical or corporeal phenomena into language or discourse. Pain remains an irreducibly corporeal phenomenon, experienced as suffering and physical constraint, whose reality is not negated by its necessary interpretive mediation. What ultimately matters for Vattimo is the way in which phenomena such as pain are historically and linguistically interpreted, and how these interpretations render them meaningful, justified, or tolerated, thereby conditioning concrete practices that either generate violence or contribute to its reduction. While it is true that Vattimo does not focus primarily on the physical or corporeal aspects of violence, it is incorrect to claim that he entirely ignores them or is unable to account for them. The charge that Vattimo overemphasizes the linguistic mediation of physical violence and ignores its material reality—formulated, for example, by Harris (2012)—is therefore unsustainable.

1.5. Weak Thought and the Theoretical Context of Violence – Concluding Remarks

The significance of Vattimo's interpretation of violence outlined above lies in its rethinking of the complex relationship between violence, claims to truth, metaphysics, history, and the contemporary world. Rather than offering yet another theory of violence within political or social philosophy focused primarily on mechanisms of power and domination—although these issues are not ignored—Vattimo concentrates on uncovering the ontological and epistemological foundations of violence and their entanglement with history. His account allows contemporary forms of violence to be linked to the ontological embeddedness of human existence in history and to the influence of inherited traditions, especially philosophical traditions. Within this framework, Vattimo offers an interpretation of history that discloses the metaphysical sources of violence embedded in the tradition, as well as an interpretation of the contemporary historical situation that identifies metaphysical residues generating violence (both interpretations will be discussed in greater detail in the subsequent section of this article).

At the same time, the universal thesis concerning the interpretive character of violence and metaphysics as its source provides the theoretical framework that enables Vattimo to relate diverse forms of violence—corporeal, psychological, institutional, social, and others—and to demonstrate their underlying unity. Moreover, his approach remains consistent with his radically anti-metaphysical, hermeneutic, and postmodern assumptions of weak thought, while retaining the capacity for critical engagement with contemporary structures and manifestations of violence. In this sense, Vattimo seeks to articulate a position that moves beyond the opposition between metaphysical realism and relativism and to orient hermeneutics toward its practical dimension. His approach provides a theoretical grounding for the practical, ethico-political dimension of hermeneutics, including the formulation of concrete proposals aimed at the reduction of violence.

2. Violence in the Context of the Contemporary World and History

The second domain of Vattimo's interpretation of violence concerns the context of the contemporary situation and history. On the one hand, this context presupposes the theoretical framework of violence discussed above. On the other, it seeks to justify it by revealing both the presence of metaphysical violence throughout history and in the present, while also showing how the possibility of weak thought is embedded within them. Metaphysical violence involves the absolutization of particular interpretations in the present and thus the neglect of the fact that these interpretations are the result of a historical process and a response to a specific historical situation, meaning they are temporary and perspectival in nature (Vattimo, 2014). Metaphysics treats what is historical and finite as something ultimately and absolutely true. Vattimo's remedy for this aspect of metaphysical violence is the ontology of provenance—an interpretation of history (Vattimo, 1997, 2021)—and the ontology of actuality, understood as an interpretation of the contemporary historical situation (Vattimo, 2003, 2014, 2017, 2021). These constitute two sides of a single project of weak ontology aimed at relocating everything that appears indisputably true and necessary onto the plane of historicity and contingency. They form a unity and mutually inform one another, since the present world is rooted in history, and understanding the contemporary moment requires grasping its historical genesis, while the interpretation of history inevitably proceeds from the present context, as the past is present only insofar as it speaks to and influences the present.

2.1. The Ontology of Provenance

The ontology of provenance shows how history leads to the present moment (Vattimo, 1997). This process, however, does not imply teleological necessity. Vattimo does not propose a philosophy of history in the Hegelian sense. He assumes neither a predetermined ultimate goal of history nor immutable laws governing its course. Instead, he proposes an interpretation of history, which takes as its point of departure the horizon of the contemporary hermeneutic situation. The first function of the ontology of provenance is to reveal the historical genesis of the present, including metaphysical theories, structures, and concepts functioning within it often mistakenly regarded as ahistorical.

Its second function is to uncover the emancipatory potential of history by offering a narrative of history that presents it as a source of possibilities for freedom and the limitation of metaphysical violence. The central idea of Vattimo's interpretation of history is that history should be understood as a process of the gradual dissolution of metaphysical structures and the weakening of Being (Vattimo, 1999, 2017). The contemporary world thus appears as the epoch of the end of metaphysics, in which absolutist interpretations reveal themselves as unjustified and devoid of their former power to shape reality. Nietzsche plays a key role in this account of history. Through his declaration that "God is dead" and his concept of fulfilled nihilism, he was, in Vattimo's view, the first to clearly recognize the absence of ultimate foundations and the interpretive character of reality (Vattimo, 1988, 1997). In Vattimo's later work, a second pivotal moment in the history of the weakening of Being is found in the emergence of the idea of *kenosis*, the self-emptying of the transcendent and absolute God into the finite, historically situated human form of Christ (Vattimo, 1999, 2002). For Vattimo, the essence of Christianity lies in the weakening of the metaphysical nature of God, and, consequently, in the weakening of the link between religion and violence, marking the beginning of secularization (Vattimo, 1999, 2002).

From this perspective, Vattimo, following Heidegger, speaks of the necessity of the *Verwindung* of metaphysics, understood as its distortion and convalescence (Vattimo, 1988, 1997, 2014). Metaphysics cannot simply be overcome (*Überwinden*), rejected as a past error, and replaced by an allegedly more accurate alternative in the form of a hermeneutic interpretation of Being. Such a gesture would itself be metaphysical, as it would follow the metaphysical logic of beginning anew from an absolute point and declaring metaphysics false for failing to correspond to reality (Vattimo, 1997, 2017). *Verwindung* entails, on the one hand, accepting metaphysics as an authentic stage in the history of Being, during which Being unfolded as presence and permanence (Vattimo, 1988, 2019). On the other, it involves distorting metaphysics' original aims and claims by placing it within the dynamic of the history of Being. It is therefore an effort of continual remembrance (*Andenken*) and rethinking of metaphysical concepts, liberating them from their foundationalist character and treating them as both belonging to the past and as our inescapable heritage, outside of which we have no access to Being (Vattimo, 1988, 2017, 2019). For this reason, Vattimo often conveys the idea of Verwindung through the metaphor of recovering from an illness, whose traces and remnants we still carry with us (Vattimo, 1988, 1997, 2017).

An example of such *Verwindung* can be found in Vattimo's interpretation of science. This interpretation involves two main elements. First, science undergoes hermeneuticization: it is stripped of its metaphysical status as the privileged domain of true knowledge about objective reality and becomes one mode of understanding the world, alongside philosophy, art and religion (Vattimo, 1997). Vattimo notes that this hermeneutic turn is already underway within the philosophy of science itself, for instance in the works of Kuhn (Vattimo, 2017). Second, science and technology based on it turn out not to be agents of metaphysical stabilization of Being, but instead contribute to the weakening of metaphysics by destabilizing the notion of fixed reality and preparing the world without facts. As Vattimo notes, science increasingly speaks of objects that can no longer be compared to those encountered in everyday life (Vattimo, 2010a). Meanwhile, technology gives rise to the postmodern world of mass media and the proliferation of world-images, in which strong conceptual distinctions are blurred and the line between natural and artificially created needs becomes difficult to draw (Vattimo, 1992, 1997).

The third function of the ontology of provenance is to justify Vattimo's own hermeneutic philosophy as an adequate response to the message of the weakening of Being conveyed by history. For Vattimo, hermeneutics cannot claim that it describes objective reality more accurately than alternative interpretations (Vattimo, 1997, 2003, 2017); instead, it must present itself as a product of the historical process—the result of a particular sequence of events. In other words, by telling a story of the origin of hermeneutics and showing how history prepared its possibility. Hermeneutic philosophy can legitimate itself only by arguing that it is a hermeneutically appropriate interpretation of the legacy to which it belongs and that, on the basis of its own reconstruction of history, it represents a more persuasive and more justified choice than other interpretations (Vattimo, 1997).

2.2. The Ontology of Actuality

In contrast, the ontology of actuality interprets the present as the epoch of the end of metaphysics (Vattimo, 2014, 2017, 2021). It reveals the characteristic features of the historical horizon into which we are thrown and contributes to the reduction of violence in two ways. First, it identifies and analyzes phenomena indicative of the weakening of Being in the contemporary world, such as the hermeneuticization of science, religious ecumenism, and the postmodern plurality of small narratives. In doing so, it demonstrates that metaphysics no longer holds either theoretical or phenomenological justification. Second, it tracks the remnants of metaphysics—those still-operating interpretations that lay claim to absolute truth and supreme authority—and exposes them, at the theoretical level, as merely interpretations (Vattimo, 2003, 2014, 2021). The concept of the ontology of actuality operates in both the *genetivus subjectivus* and the *genetivus objectivus* senses: it interprets the present while also being a product of it, since the hermeneutic idea of interpretation and its corresponding ontology become possible only within the epoch of the end of metaphysics and the weakening of Being (Vattimo, 2014, 2021). Such an ontology has no other source or justification for its interpretation than the very situation it interprets and from which it arises (Vattimo, 2003, 2021).

3. The Practical-Political Context of Violence

3.1. Weak Thought as a Hermeneutic Practice of Reducing Violence

When addressing the third, practical-political context of Vattimo's interpretation of violence, it is important to note that in the 21st century Vattimo abandoned the optimism he had previously held regarding the emancipatory potential of postmodern society—an optimism still evident in the 1990s, particularly in *The Transparent Society*. In that work, he argued that the features of postmodern society, such as mass media generating a multiplicity of images that replace reality, would almost automatically lead to the erosion of metaphysical narratives and foster pluralism of interpretations (Vattimo, 1992). In his later writings, however, Vattimo became significantly more critical of contemporary socio-political reality, identifying a resurgence of metaphysical tendencies and, consequently, an intensification of violence. This involved aspects of a globalized world such as the dominance of economic liberalism and the surge in social inequalities, the increase of social control and surveillance in the West under the pretext of the war on terror, and the return of "strong" narratives in the form of religious fundamentalism and the clash of cultures (Vattimo, 2017, 2021).

According to Vattimo, the response to this violence lies in recognizing hermeneutics as a form of existential and political engagement with the world aimed at the reduction of violence (Vattimo, 2014, 2017, 2021). As Lindsey (2013) observes, the principle of violence reduction serves as the starting point for Vattimo's reflections on ethics, politics, and society. This principle can organize a post-metaphysical political project, as it remains in line with weak ontology and does not propose a new metaphysical narrative (Lindsey, 2013). For Vattimo, hermeneutics must become both a philosophy of praxis, with the emancipation of humankind as its stake, and a practice involving political commitment to transforming reality (Vattimo, 2010a, 2017, 2021).[3]

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[3] In Vattimo's oft-repeated formulation, according to which hermeneutics must be both a philosophy of *praxis* and a practice that transforms the world, one can discern echoes of Gadamer's conception of hermeneutics as a practical philosophy and his distinction between practical philosophy and *praxis* itself, that is, between knowledge concerning the nature of the good life, the proper ends of action, and the general conditions of praxis, and the actual practice that determines what is good in a concrete situation (Gadamer, 2004). However, unlike Gadamer, Vattimo insists that hermeneutics cannot remain merely

Its practical and political dimension stems from the concept of weak Being, which exists only through interpretations, as well as from the notion of hermeneutics as an ontology of actuality tasked with offering a persuasive narrative of contemporary reality and responding to the problems and challenges it presents. If there are only interpretations, then proposing new ones is as much a theoretical activity offering new ways of understanding as it is a practical endeavor of shaping reality (Vattimo, 2021). Rephrasing Marx's 11th Thesis on Feuerbach, Vattimo writes: "Until now philosophers thought they were only interpreting the world, yet they were truly changing it" (Vattimo, 2021, p. 184). The philosopher is engaged in the Being they interpret: they cannot speak about it without participating in its happening and constituting a part of its history (Vattimo, 2017). Hence: "in philosophy I believe that some political good is always at stake, some question of the political community. That is what justifies philosophy as teaching, philosophy in newspapers, and philosophy in politics too" (Vattimo, 2010a, p. 105). This marks a break with the classical division between theory and praxis, in which theory is presumed to provide the foundation for praxis, and a ready-made theoretical project is subsequently applied to practice. For this reason, Vattimo maintains that hermeneutics, as weak thought, is inherently political as it is a praxis situated within concrete reality and actively transforms that reality through interpretation aimed at reducing metaphysical violence (Vattimo, 2003, 2010a, 2017). The ontology of weak Being "supplies philosophical reasons for preferring a liberal, tolerant, and democratic society rather than an authoritarian and totalitarian one" (Vattimo, 2003, p. 19). Hermeneutics thus becomes a political project oriented toward human emancipation (Ambord, 2022; D'Arcais, 2007; Risser, 2010), understood as situation of freedom to interpret.

Vattimo concretizes the goal of practical-political emancipation through two tasks assigned to hermeneutics. First, hermeneutics must demonstrate that all metaphysical claims to truth function as claims to domination and as sources of violence (Vattimo, 2010b, 2017). For Vattimo, truth is employed in political discourse as an ideological tool to legitimize domination over others. However, this connection between truth and power is neither natural nor necessary, stemming from some immutable human nature; rather,

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a philosophy of *praxis*; it must also take the form of concrete political action aimed at reducing violence in the world.

it is historical and contingent (Vattimo, 2017, 2021). Breaking this link is possible through the weakening of the metaphysical conception of truth and through subordinating the phenomenon of truth in the political sphere to democracy and freedom. Hence, "'the truth will make you free' ought to be rephrased: not 'that which is true frees me,' but 'that which frees me is true'" (Vattimo, 2010a, p. 96). The second task is "demonstrating, first of all theoretically, but also with an active presence in public opinion, that rational human coexistence is possible without 'the truth', namely with regard to the plurality of values and worldviews that constitute the richness, rather than the danger, of humanity" (Vattimo, 2010b, p. 284).

3.2. The Political Dimension of Vattimo's Philosophy

At the level of practical philosophy, hermeneutics becomes primarily an interpretation of democracy as a system that is supposed to be pluralistic and tolerant and is thus best suited to the epoch of the end of metaphysics.[4] This interpretation outlines how democratic governance should function in a world where only interpretations exist. Vattimo advocates a procedural rather than essentialist conception of democracy (Martin, 2010). Democracy should provide space for open and polyphonic discourse and reject appeals to absolute truth and to natural order (Vattimo, 2003, 2014, 2017). As he states: "where there is democracy, there cannot be a class of those who possess the truth and either exercise power directly (Plato's philosopher-kings) or dictate rules of conduct to the sovereign" (Vattimo, 2014, p. 16). Accordingly, democratic discourse must abandon the idea of human rights based on an innate and common human nature, as well as the concept of natural equality among people, due to their metaphysical character (Vattimo, 2003). As he notes: "Equality is not a natural fact; it is precisely the opposite" (Vattimo, 2003, p. 107). Equality is thus socially constructed, always realized within

[4] Bacon (2016) is mistaken in claiming that Vattimo would be more consistent if he held that the weakening of metaphysics does not justify any political system—particularly that it does not justify democracy more than any other form of governance—and if he maintained that democratic politics requires no conception of truth, metaphysical or otherwise. The former position would entail abandoning the inherent political dimension of hermeneutics, so crucial for Vattimo, as well as the concrete political implications of weak thought. The latter would result in arbitrariness and relativism, which Vattimo seeks to avoid.

a specific historical situation and rooted in the history of political transformations. The value of equality in a democracy must be subordinated to the overarching goal of emancipation and the reduction of violence (Vattimo, 2003).

Hermeneutics, as political practice, also involves exposing specific metaphysical structures and beliefs shaping contemporary reality—such as those previously mentioned, including the dominance of liberal capitalism, assumed as the default and optimal economic order, or religious fundamentalism. To these, one may add the weakening of natural justification in the political sphere, that is, the tendency to ground political claims, decisions, and actions through appeals to objective nature, whether the nature of economic reality or of the human being (Vattimo, 2003, 2017). Alongside this critical function, hermeneutics supports concrete political proposals consistent with weak thought. For example, in *Nihilism and Emancipation*, Vattimo argues that interpretive freedom, including the free projection of one's own life, requires the greatest possible equality of initial opportunities, supported by access to affordable health care, free education, guaranteed housing, and even a basic income (Vattimo, 2003).

The foregoing characterization of the political dimension of weak thought demonstrates that the hermeneutic pluralism of interpretations advocated by Vattimo has little in common with the neoliberal pluralism of lifestyles, opinions, and consumer goods. The latter lacks both anti-metaphysical radicalism (being itself metaphysical, insofar as it endorses the universal hegemony of free-market logic and dominance of liberal and individualist ideologies) and genuine critical force (since it does not so much challenge the prevailing socio-economic order as function as an integral part of it, stabilizing and reproducing it under the guise of diversity and tolerance). As a result, neoliberal pluralism remains fully compatible with various forms of structural violence. By contrast, Vattimo's hermeneutics aims to weaken the metaphysical structures that sustain domination and thereby reduce violence in all its forms. It is therefore intrinsically emancipatory and critically oriented toward existing social reality, and incompatible with any apology for the status quo and structural violence inscribed in it and thus avoids the risk of co-optation by the capitalist order.

At the same time, Vattimo recognizes the risks involved in philosophers' political engagement within the concrete ontic world. The emblematic example of such risk for him is Heidegger. Vattimo interprets Heidegger's involvement with Nazism as a failure to maintain the ontological difference, specifically as a conflation of the return of Being with a particular ontic political project, one purporting to restore a mythical pre-metaphysical world in the modern age (Vattimo, 2021). The lesson Vattimo draws from Heidegger's example is twofold. First, the philosopher must accept responsibility for political engagement and the risk of error (Vattimo, 2021), while remaining aware of this risk. Therefore, she must avoid ideological involvement that ignores the ontological difference (Valgenti, 2014). Second, a distinction between the philosopher and politician must be preserved. The philosopher adopts a more critical and distanced stance toward the existing state of affairs (Vattimo, 2010a). Her participation in politics should not primarily consist in direct involvement in decision-making, law-making, or party activity, but rather in offering general diagnoses of reality, meaningful ideas, and concepts that explain specific phenomena, thus shaping social and political attitudes (Vattimo, 2010a). At the same time, as Valgenti (2014) rightly observes, the philosopher should not simply function as an expert or external authority *vis-à-vis* political practice, providing objective criteria for political action. Thus, while the distinction between philosophy and politics is preserved in Vattimo's thought, it is also weakened, to the extent that neither the figure of the philosopher without practical-political involvement, nor that of the politician without philosophically interpreted responsibility for responding to the weakening of Being and the reduction of metaphysical violence, can be properly conceived. As D'Arcais (2017) observes, philosophy and politics in Vattimo's thought become two forms of the same emancipatory practice in the contemporary world of the end of metaphysics. The philosopher's existence becomes a vocation (Vattimo, 2010a), intrinsically tied to the role of the politically engaged thinker, that is, a practitioner who remains mindful of the ontological difference.

Conclusion

Connection Between the Three Contexts of Violence

In conclusion, several observations can be made regarding Vattimo's interpretation of violence. First, it should be made explicit what has been implicitly assumed throughout this article: that the three contexts outlined above form a unified whole in Vattimo's thought, mutually shaping and justifying one another. The theoretical concept of the metaphysical origins of violence and its remedy in the form of weak thought is justified by Vattimo's account of the present (ontology of actuality) and history (ontology of provenance). At the same time, these ontologies presuppose a weak interpretation of Being.

From both contexts it follows that hermeneutic philosophy is not limited to theory but is a situated interpretive practice aimed at transforming the contemporary world of global technological and capitalist domination through the reduction of violence. To fulfill its practical-political function without losing its critical edge—namely, without reverting to metaphysical habits of proposing a new, singularly correct social order—the practical dimension of hermeneutics must, for Vattimo, remain theoretically grounded in the ontology of weak Being and in the interpretation of history as its weakening. These provide the guiding framework for how its practical dimension is supposed to be enacted: as the dissolution of metaphysical foundations of violence driven by the recognition that there are only interpretations and aimed at the constitution of a maximally open, tolerant, and democratic society.

This dependence is reciprocal. The practical dimension of reducing violence shapes the horizon of reflection on the present and the interpretation of history. For example, the encounter with specific phenomena during practical engagement enriches the understanding of the contemporary world, while theoretical reflection remains tied to hermeneutic practice and is itself an interpretive practice that shapes reality. Nevertheless, D'Arcais (2007) overstates the practical and political dimension of Vattimo's hermeneutics when he claims that its theoretical goal (anti-metaphysical and anti-dogmatic) is one-sidedly governed by its political goal (anti-authoritarian and anti-violent). As Valgenti (2014) rightly observes, it would be an oversimplification to claim that the overriding motivation behind Vattimo's hermeneutics is merely a rationalization of leftist ideology and the source of weak thought is neither purely theoretical nor purely practical or political.

Descriptive and Normative Aspects of Vattimo's Account of Violence

A second observation concerns the dual character of Vattimo's interpretation which is both descriptive and normative. By presenting Being as an event and identifying metaphysics as the source of violence, he simultaneously formulates a practical task of reducing violence and indicates the manner in which this task should be carried out. This duality also appears at the metaphilosophical level. Descriptively, Vattimo portrays philosophy as it has always already been—namely, an inherently political interpretation of reality. Normatively, he calls for philosophy to acknowledge and assume this role explicitly. Consequently, Vattimo advocates stronger engagement of philosophical reflection with concrete social and political problems of contemporary society (Vattimo, 2003, 2017, 2021).

Limits of Vattimo's Conception of Violence—The Problem of the Non-Human

Vattimo's concept of interpretive violence rooted in metaphysics implies that violence is intrinsically linked to language and history: it involves the denial of someone's right to participate in discourse and is conditioned by historical circumstances. While I have argued that Vattimo does not simply reduce violence to its discursive dimension alone, it still raises a question that ultimately remains unresolved here: to what extent does such an interpretation of risks oversimplify the complexity and variety of the phenomenon of violence? The problem of physical violence raised by this question has already been addressed in this article. However, another issue remains that is equally pressing and potentially more troubling.

A further difficulty concerns the non-human. In Vattimo's framework, the category of violence applies only to actions rooted in language and history, which effectively restricts it to human agents. This position follows from Vattimo's conception of violence as interpretive in its core and from the assumption that non-human beings lack history and language and therefore cannot engage in interpretation in a strict sense. Consequently, Vattimo does not address the existence of violence in the non-human world and considers human violence against nature only in terms of its consequences for human beings (Vattimo, 2003, 2021).

Violence against the natural environment can be thus conceptualized only from a human perspective. Namely, as a dogmatic imposition of a particular interpretation of what nature is (for instance, from a technoscientific or capitalist standpoint, in which nature is understood as a resource to be exploited), leading to destructive actions against the environment and the exclusion of alternative interpretations. The natural environment, insofar as it is always mediated by interpretation, it becomes a fundamentally cultural phenomenon (Vattimo, 1988, 1994). Consequently, Vattimo not only denies any intrinsic normative value to nature, but effectively leaves no room for an autonomous non-human domain at all. Non-human animals and the environment as a whole are not treated as full-fledged subjects or agents within interpretive processes. This eliminates any basis for attributing agency or normative claims to non-human beings or ecological systems. It thus becomes evident that, despite his proclaimed weakening of the metaphysical category of the subject, Vattimo's philosophy ultimately remains anthropocentric.

This does not preclude critique of the devastation of the natural environment. Vattimo himself interprets environmental degradation as a manifestation of the dominance of a metaphysical interpretation of nature (Vattimo, 2003). However, he also criticizes ecological thought for its own metaphysical character, particularly its tendency to essentialize nature and to ascribe to it an immanent normative value (Vattimo, 2003). By rejecting nature as an ontological foundation, Vattimo rules out the possibility of articulating an autonomous environmental ontology and instead subordinates ecological thinking to human political emancipation. Consequently, concern for the non-human environment is rendered derivative of human interpretive horizons, historical situation, and political goals, rather than recognized as grounded in the significance of nature itself. This raises a serious doubt as to whether an ecological critique grounded in Vattimo's philosophy can provide a sufficiently robust theoretical basis for the effective protection of the natural environment.[5]

At the same time, alternative developments within hermeneutics suggest otherwise. Works inspired by Heidegger demonstrate the

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[5] These are, of course, not the only objections raised in the literature regarding Vattimo's conception of violence. For example, White (2009) points to the problematic nature of deriving the imperative to reduce violence from a weak, non-foundational thought. Lindsey (2013) highlights the ambiguity in Vattimo's distinction between unjustified, metaphysical violence and justified violence—for instance, in self-defense—as well as his underestimation of the impact of new technologies on the contemporary understanding of violence. Webb (2011) argues that Vattimo's notion of violence is both too rigid, failing to capture all forms of possible authoritarianism, and too general, lacking sufficient precision to clearly determine when violence is actually at play. Regardless of the extent to which these criticisms are fully justified, and one could attempt to defend Vattimo's hermeneutics against them, it can nonetheless be said that Vattimo's unconventional conception of violence, which links it to metaphysics, has provoked lively discussion.

possibility of ecological reflection on the natural environment within this tradition (see, e.g., Foltz, 1995; Fontini, 2022; McWhorter & Stenstad, 2009). Vattimo's framework therefore calls for a revision of its approach to nature—one that would reduce its anthropocentric character, seek a stronger embedding of the human being in the world understood not only as a cultural and linguistic domain but also as a natural environment (even if our understanding of this environment remains mediated by interpretations), and allow nature and non-human beings to participate more autonomously in the play of understanding, while preserving the anti-metaphysical and hermeneutic core of weak thought. Whether such a revision is compatible with Vattimo's assumptions remains an open question.[6]

Reducing Violence as an Ongoing Task

A final remark concerns the nature of Vattimo's proposed remedy for violence. Weak thought is neither a universal cure for violence, nor a means of achieving a completely non-violent order of reality (Vattimo, 2003, 2017). Since metaphysics cannot ultimately be overcome but only subjected to *Verwindung*, also violence itself cannot be entirely eliminated. In other words, interpretive violence is unavoidable.

What remains possible is its reduction: a continuous critical effort to weaken its structures and disrupt metaphysical patterns within specific historical contexts. This process has no endpoint, as new metaphysical sources of violence will inevitably emerge. The reduction of violence must therefore be understood as an unending process, not a final state that can be achieved once and for all. For Vattimo, the project of emancipation remains permanently unfinished and always ongoing (Marder, 2011). This is reflected in a telling passage from *Being and Its Surroundings*, in which Vattimo describes hermeneutical communism as "a shadow that accompanies and torments [...] the established order and the prevailing power structures" (Vattimo, 2021, p. 154). The communism Vattimo envisions is not a positive revolutionary proposal to abolish the existing order and establish a new, non-violent social and political system, but rather an endless critique directed at the metaphysical aspects of contemporary public sphere.

[6] The necessity and feasibility of such a revision within the framework of Vattimo's interpretation of kenosis are acknowledged by Daniele Fulvi (2022); however, he does not specify the content of the proposed revision.

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