There is a lot of rhetoric and commotion about “violence”, even in the scientific community itself. We hear daily about violent military conflicts, violations of human rights, domestic violence, violence in the media and in sports, and emotional and verbal violence. In 1972 58% of American males thought that burning a draft card or holding a sit-in is violent.¹ UNESCO commissioned twenty scientists to make a platform statement, the “Seville Statement on Violence” (November, 1989), to condemn the notion that human beings have a biological, genetically determined basis for violence and aggression. Moreover, social scientists have been debating how to define ‘violence’ for practical reasons. Particularly in doing empirical research, it becomes a practical issue to have a clear definition of ‘violence’: is the incidence of domestic violence, of violence in school, of aggressive displays in troops of chimpanzees on the rise? How to tell, if we have no criteria for what constitutes violent or aggressive behavior? It is ironic that a large literature has arisen recently in and across various social sciences on the meaning of ‘aggression’ and ‘violence’ independently of much reference to or involvement by philosophers.²

It is ironic since the analysis of the conception of violence and its connections to related conceptions seems to fall squarely in the provenance of philosophy. Moreover, the current lack of philosophers becomes even more puzzling given the considerable philosophical interest on this topic during the sixties and seventies – incited by the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War.³

In any case, I shall proceed. I propose here to define ‘violence’. In doing so, I shall distinguish ‘forcefulness’, ‘aggression’ and ‘violence’. Because the current usage, both in ordinary language and in the various academic fields, is not consistent, my definitions, although descriptive, will also be somewhat stipulative and precise.
'Violence' in its original sense connotes 'force'. We speak of a strong wind as a "violent" wind; a strong passion as a "violent" passion. Yet someone "violent" in this way need not be bad. Moreover, certainly the thing that is "violent" in this sense need not be morally blameworthy nor even be a moral agent. In contrast, 'violent', in many of its current uses and connotations, does have such moral dimensions. Let me then call this basic, amoral sense, of an agent using force while doing something with more force, effort, or effect than usual 'forceful'. Inanimate as well as animate objects can act "forcefully" in this sense.

This basic conception of forcefulness agrees with the concept of force in physics. Following Feynman, Rubin Gotesky defines 'force' as that "which is capable of producing or does produce a change in motion, in shape, in quality, or in all of these aspects." 'Power' then will be "the amount or degree of force in operation", and 'forcefulness' the "extensive and radical changes within a short interval of time produced by given forces in the qualities or structures of anything". Note that forcefulness is defined by the effects upon the recipients of the force, and not by an intrinsic character of the action. A small event can produce rapid, radical change. A butterfly flapping its wings can cause a thunderstorm; a twitch of a finger on a trigger or button can kill. So then an act is forceful in terms of the effects that it has – not in terms of its own rapidity, effort, quantity of force exerted etc. I also leave it open whether acts of omission can be forceful, as they can cause radical change. For instance, failing to close the floodgates can drown many; not having safety inspections can cause many to fall ill. In this way we shall not decide, by the fiat of definition, whether certain institutional policies towards workers or towards the poor are not "violent", since they are not "forceful".

In line with its root sense of 'approach' or 'attack', aggression is a particular conception of forcefulness where the force is directed towards a particular object. Thus, we do not often speak of an "aggressive" storm, as the storm does not pick out its targets. This selective attention on the part of the agent suggests purposive behavior and an intentional aspect. Aggression appears to be intentional forceful action. Although inanimate objects may act "forcefully", only animate agents, human or animal, capable of goal-directed behavior, can act "aggressively" in this sense.
Moreover, ‘aggression’ has the connotation of seeking to do something for the sake of the aggressor at the expense of the one being attacked. I suggest that we exclude this connotation from the definition of ‘aggression’ in order to avoid making every act of aggression be morally wrong by the fiat of definition. It might be that aggression is generally wrong. For an aggressive act, when successful, typically causes its recipient harm. Yet, this should require argument and may have exceptions, so many say. Moreover, social scientists generally wish to avoid making moral judgments or acknowledge a moral dimension to their subject matter.\(^9\) (Accordingly, it is common for them to speak of ‘aggression’ more than of ‘violence’.) In philosophy there is no need to avoid this moral dimension. However, even if all aggressive acts be bad morally, such a moral judgment ought not to follow merely in virtue of its definition. Hence, aggression should be defined in a morally neutral way.\(^{10}\)

However, many social scientists are not satisfied even with this amoral definition of ‘aggression’. They want also to avoid having to determine or refer to the intentions of the agent. Indeed, as many insist, how are human ethologists to know the intentions of a fish, a goose, a rat, a bonobo? Rather than guess, they tend to define ‘aggression’ behaviorally, without reference to the intentions or goals of the agent animal.\(^{11}\)

Accordingly, many follow E.O. Wilson, who defines ‘aggression’ as “a physical threat or threat of action by one individual that reduces the freedom or genetic fitness of another.”\(^{12}\) This follows the major *O.E.D.* definition, “the exercise of physical force . . . tending to cause bodily injury, or forcibly interfering with personal freedom”. By ‘freedom’, Wilson means ‘freedom of movement and action [of an animal], to use its abilities and develop its capacities’. By ‘genetic fitness’, Wilson means ‘the ability of the individual to survive and to reproduce its own kind, by contributing to the gene flow’.\(^{13}\)

It would be charitable to understand Wilson’s conception of ‘action’ broadly, so as to include not only direct acts but also at least some omissions, or failures to act. One member of a species, say, a mother, may withhold food from another, say, her young, until the young individual acts in a certain way. Now she is not
acting directly. But, as the young animal depends on the parent to survive, and withholding food threatens both the freedom and the genetic fitness of the young individual, it might very well be that the mother is “threatening” the young individual and acting aggressively through an omission instead of an action. Once again, I do not think that it should be settled, by definition, whether in fact a failure to act is an act of omission or simply the absence of an action. Recall my claim that the forcefulness of the action should be measured by its effects and not by its intrinsic character.

Many have made other objections and emendments to Wilson’s definition. First, some object that it would not count as aggressive failed attempts at aggression. We can rectify that by talking instead of the type of action of which the act in question is an instance. The individual act would be aggressive if that type of act of which it is an instance tends to reduce, or is intended to reduce, the freedom or genetic fitness of an individual.

Others object that aggression lies on a continuum ending at completely non-violent behaviors. The difficulty lies in there being actions at all points of the continuum that are used to resolve successfully problems between members of the same species. So aggression seems neither wrong nor clearly demarcated. We can handle these problems by insisting that aggressive acts be ‘forceful’ as defined above and by insisting also that an aggressive act is not necessarily a destructive or a morally bad act. Rather, take ‘aggression’ to have no moral dimensions by definition.

This insistence would also allay the fears, mentioned above, of those who do not want to call the behavior of parents towards their young “aggressive”. We can admit that this behavior is aggressive, in that the freedom of the young is indeed being restrained, often physically, by the parent. Still, it is in the young animal’s best interest, in terms of surviving, to be, e.g., pulled away from a cliff or from an electrical receptacle.

Although we may eliminate the notions of moral evil and destructiveness from the conception of aggression, still it does seem hopeless, despite the hope of some social scientists, to eliminate the notion of intention from it. Often the element of intention sneaks in by speaking of a ‘threat’ or of ‘the behavior of one animal towards another’. Yet ‘behavior towards’ and ‘threat’ indicate an intentional
component. A clumsy animal that causes another animal to fall out of a tree would hardly be acting aggressively – although acting forcefully – even if the fallen one has lost both freedom of action and genetic fitness, by breaking a leg. We can say, again metaphorically, that a clumsy action, like a flood, can ‘threaten’ the life of an animal. Yet to say that one animal threatens another suggests something intentional. Reports of animal behavior commonly talk this way, of goals and motives. We may as well admit the intentionality. Again, let me repeat that I do not mean to require a deliberate, self-conscious intentionality. Rather intentionality here concerns the basic, minimal sort, in conformity with which an animal moves towards a food source or away from a threat “intentionally”.

We may then define ‘aggression’ as ‘a forceful action, done intentionally by an agent, of a type of action that tends, or intends, to reduce both the freedom or the genetic fitness of those affected by that action’.

In short, aggression is forcefulness plus intention and injury. I define ‘injury’ as ‘reducing the freedom or (inclusive ‘or’) the genetic fitness of those affected’. For, if I am injured, my present or future survival becomes less likely, and my present and future ability to act is lessened. Pain typically functions as a symptom or an indication to a sentient animal that its freedom or genetic fitness is being reduced or has a threat of being reduced. Also, I assume here that the subjective feeling of pain (the quale) is intrinsically bad: ceteris paribus, pain ought not to be felt. Accordingly, I define ‘harm’ as ‘injury or pain’.

So far, in defining ‘forcefulness’ and ‘aggression’, I have included no moral component. It is certainly possible also to define ‘violence’ amorally too. For, as we have noted, there is no person morally to blame for a “violent” storm or a “violent” sneeze. Still, we do need a sense of ‘violence’ that carries moral weight to address current issues and usage. Moreover, in many contexts, as noted above, ‘violence’ has negative connotations. For to call something ‘violent’ is often to give at least a prima facie reason why it is morally wrong.

However, being morally wrong differs from being in the moral sphere. So as not to beg any questions, it would be prudent to have two different conceptions of violence, a basic one having a
component of moral responsibility and a pejorative one having that component as well as carrying the negative connotation of being wrong. After developing these definitions, we shall be in a position to see why even the former definition implies a *prima facie* moral wrong.

In contrast to aggression, I shall thus take ‘violence’ in the basic sense to signify a certain sort of aggression, namely an aggressive activity to which moral judgments, of being good or bad, apply. In many moral and legal theories, such judgments require, among other things, considering the conscious volitions of the moral agent(s). According to such views, if you are aware of what you are doing, will to do so, and could do otherwise, you are morally responsible for those acts. You might, then, be able to do something without being morally responsible, if you did not will the act, or were not aware of what you are doing, or were in a mental state of extreme duress or emotion. At any rate, I shall suppose here that normal cases of human intentional action are subject to moral judgment and are chosen.

Accordingly, an action is violent in this basic sense when it is aggressive and is chosen. Violence, then, contains a moral component associated with choosing to engage in actions that harm another person and attempting to force that person to act as you want. To get violence in the pejorative sense, we need to add the condition that the choice made is a morally wrong one. That is, the agent ought not to make that choice.

We sometimes talk of “emotional violence” or “mental violence”, where, via propaganda or emotional outbursts, you may force another to your views. Audi emphasizes this point and insists on the recognition of these types of “violence”. Robert Nozick even goes so far as to call rational philosophical arguments coercive, or “violent” in this sense. So long as it is admitted that emotional and verbal outbursts cause harm, the definitions, of ‘violence’ in both senses, can apply. Still, not automatically: we must provide justifications on a case-by-case basis.

To sum up, I am proposing the following:

- An act is violent in the basic sense iff (1) the attempted action is aggressive (2) the agent is morally responsible for that attempt to cause harm (pain or injury) to the patient
An act is violent in the pejorative sense iff (1) the attempted action is aggressive (2) the agent is morally responsible for that attempt to cause harm (pain or injury) to the patient (3) the agent ought not to will to inflict that harm, and (4) the patient should not want to suffer that harm. (I.e., the action unjustly violates the rights of the victim, where ‘rights’ signifies the morally ideal set of entitlements that the recipient of the action (typically a person) ought to have.)

As many moral theorists agree, a person may be generous without doing generous acts at times.27 So too, a person may not be violent and still do violent acts. Again, a violent person may do non-violent acts. To account for this difference, I define ‘a violent person’ as ‘a person who does violent acts regularly for their own sake’, or, more precisely:

- A person is violent iff (1) she does a violent action or wills it “for its own sake” or “in itself” and (2) she knows what she is doing, or wanting to do. (An act is done for its own sake if the agent would want to do it even if, ceteris paribus, there were another way to act that causes less pain or injury to the patient or victim, and the agent would not choose that alternative. The “wanting” here signifies a strong commitment to action, and not merely wishful thinking.)
- A person has a violent character iff she is violent regularly.

Some problems arise with what ‘ought’ means in these definitions. Oftentimes, we make a choice that we consider, given the alternatives available to us, to be the best one. Yet, we may not think that the action is the best one possible. In more traditional terminology, we do not chose the act without qualification, but only relative to a particular context, in a respect.28

What does it mean then for the person to will a violent action “for its own sake”? The idea is that she would want to act violently even if there were some other way of reaching her goal. She would not be violent in the pejorative sense even if deliberately choosing to do a act violent in the basic sense, if, were there another way of acting so as to reach the intended result, without inflicting harm, she would not have chosen to act thus.

In this way a surgeon who orders chemotherapy for a patient while knowing full well that that patient will suffer a lot of pain...
can be said not to act violently in the pejorative sense. Again, take a teacher who gives a student a low grade. She knows that, most likely, she will be causing the student to feel anguish at a low grade. Yet she may intend only to be reporting to the student and others how well the student has performed.

In these two cases, it might be said that no right not to have suffered pain unjustly has been violated. For the patient or the student has willingly entered into a situation where they know that pain or injury is possible. Still, if there were a less painful way for the surgeon or teacher to reach her goal, it would be morally wrong for her not to use it. A right not to suffer pain unjustly requires that the agent causing the harm not have another way available, of achieving the same end while causing less harm, ceteris paribus. Rather, the agent is justified in causing pain or injury, not merely if this were the result of helping the patient, but also if there were no other way currently available to her to reach her goal. The ‘other way’ has to be available to the agent, not to people centuries later or miles away.

Thus a person is morally responsible for deliberately choosing to inflict pain. She then is committing a violent act, in the basic sense. Whether or not the act is violent in the pejorative sense may be distinguished by counterfactuals. If the agent would have chosen an available way that would not harm but still have the same benefits, then the act is not violent in the pejorative sense. If she would not have preferred otherwise, then the pain is intentional, and her action is violent in the pejorative sense. For in the latter case she wishes to inflict pain, while in the former case she does not. The third condition in the definition applies. This makes a doctor normally not violent in the pejorative sense when she causes the patient to suffer while undergoing chemotherapy. Likewise for the teacher when she causes a student to feel anguish at a low grade. Yet, if there were a less painful alternative, the agent would have a prima facie obligation to learn about and to acquire proficiency in it. In this way, the definition leaves it open that certain institutionalized practices are violent in the pejorative sense and bad wholesale.

On account of a person doing an act violent in the basic sense having this prima facie obligation to seek out less painful alternatives, acts violent even in the basic sense are prima facie wrong. That
is, all else being equal, we ought not to choose them. Yet it does not follow, despite popular rhetoric to the contrary, that a violent act is necessarily a bad act.

What then? Are all types of passive resistance, all strategies of non-violence violent in the basic sense and hence \textit{prima facie} wrong? Yes.\footnote{32} Lest my admission be taken as a \textit{reductio ad absurdum} – as well as a blasphemous condemnation of those like Gandhi and M.L. King Jr. – let me point out that this is the position of, e.g., Gandhi. He himself admitted that his political activity in India was not \textit{ahimsa} (non-violence):

I have admitted my mistake. I thought our struggle was based on non-violence, whereas it was in reality no more than passive resistance which is essentially a weapon of the weak. It leads naturally to armed resistance whenever possible.\footnote{33}

To march up to soldiers weaponless in protest, to sit in or in front of a business, and to go into a restaurant with the expectation of being thrown out do indeed limit of the freedom of action of those whom you have targeted.\footnote{34} Perhaps they do indeed deserve it! Perhaps, but the case must be made, that more normal and peaceful methods of negotiation cannot succeed.

\textbf{NOTES}

\footnote{1} \textit{Science}, Vol. 23 (June, 1972), pp. 1300–1303, as cited in the \textit{O.E.D}.


Inter alia, the O.E.D. gives the following definitions: ‘violence’ is the exercise of physical force so as to inflict damage or injury to persons or property,” and ‘to force’ is “to exert physical or psychological power or coercion upon one to act in some determinate way.”


6 The butterfly effect in chaos theory.

7 Ronald P. Miller, “Violence, Force, and Coercion”, in J. Shaffer (ed.), Violence (New York, 1971), pp. 31–32. Some however take forcefulness to be determined by the intrinsic character of the act, like its effort or quantity of energy, and not by its effects. E.g., Robert Audi, “On the Meaning and Justification of Violence”, in J. Shaffer (ed.), Violence (New York, 1971), p. 66, says that discrimination and exclusion are not violent since they are “peacefully maintained”. Miller (p. 20), says that neglect is not violent “since neglecting cannot be done with great force”.

8 ‘Is directed towards’ should be understood in the middle voice, and not (necessarily) in the passive voice. That is, I am leaving it open whether or not an act of aggression must be committed by a moral agent, I shall claim that it must be committed by an agent having intentions, in a weak sense of ‘intention’, according to which all animals have them.


11 Cf. S. Howell and R. Willis, Societies at Peace: Anthropological Perspectives (London, 1989), who favor the etic over the emic.

12 E.O. Wilson, Sociobiology (Cambridge, MA, 1975), p. 577; cf. pp. 242–244. Also cf. Konrad Lorenz, On Aggression (New York, 1966), p. ix, who defines ‘aggression’ as “the fighting instinct in beast and man which is directed against members of the same species.” At p. 18, however, he does use ‘aggression’ in describing behavior towards another species. (In a section omitted from this version of the paper, I discuss and reject weakening Wilson’s definition to ‘... that reduces the freedom and genetic fitness of another’.)

13 E.O. Wilson, Sociobiology, p. 585.


James Silverberg and J. Patrick Gray, “Violence and Peacefulness as Behavioral Potentialities of Primates”, p. 3, likewise define ‘aggression’ as “the assertiveness (or forcefulness) indicated by one actor’s initiating toward some other(s) of an act that is higher on the violence scale than the previous act in a given interaction sequence.” This agrees with my account if by ‘violence’ they mean what I have called ‘forcefulness’.

Still, it would be better not to restrain the young if the same benefits could be gained otherwise. Indeed, this is a common Japanese criticism of American child-rearing practices! I discuss below why such practices are prima facie wrong.

For instance, Carol Lauer, “Variability in the Patterns of Agonistic Behavior in Pre-School Children”, in J. Silverberg and J. Gray (eds.), Aggression and Peacefulness in Humans and Other Primates (Oxford, 1992), p. 172, complains that aggression is difficult to observe because of its intentional element and because even of the difficulty to deciding when freedom is restrained. Hence, she suggests, we should use ‘agonistic activity’, which she defines as: “An agonistic act is any behavior relating to conflict situations, whether assertive or submissive.” Well, first we would have to define ‘conflict’ which seems intentional. For example, one animal bumping into another clumsily has not started a “conflict” although the one being bumped might react as if the bumping were a conflict. And it would react thus because typically such acts have been goal-directed and intentional. How then to judge what constitutes a “conflict”? Again, via considering intent and common practice. Moreover, it does sound strange to call completely submissive behavior “agonistic” just because it occurs in a “conflict situation”. Cf. though E.O. Wilson, Sociobiology (Cambridge, MA, 1975), p. 578, who defines ‘agonistic’ as any activity related to fighting.


Cf. Robert Simon, Sports and Social Values (Englewood Cliffs, 1985), p. 38: “Typically or paradigmatically . . . cases of violence involve the intentional use of physical force designed to harm a person or property.”

This distinction amount to what Audi calls “doing violence to” a person, versus ‘violating’ a person, where only the latter is “wrong by definition”. Robert Audi, “Violence, Legal Sanctions, and Law Enforcement”, in S. Stanage (ed.), Reason and Violence (Totowa, N.J., 1974), p. 32. The pejorative sense takes
the violation of persons as the most important feature of ‘violence’, as Newton Garver, “What Violence Is”, in T. Rose (ed.), Violence in America (New York, 1969) (= The Nation, 24 June 1968, p. 819), pp. 6–7, wants: “What is fundamental about violence is that a person is violated . . . violence in human affairs amounts to violating persons.” This definition agrees also with Ted Honderich, Political Violence (Ithaca, 1976), p. 98: a violent act is “a use of a considerable or destroying force against people or things, a use of force which offends against a norm.” Also cf. Harry Girvetz, “An Anatomy of Violence,” in S. Stanage (ed.), Reason and Violence (Totowa, N.J., 1974), p. 184, who defines ‘force or violence’ as “harm perpetrated on persons or property ranging, in the case of persons, from restraining their freedom of movement to torture and death, and, in the case of property, from simple fine or damage to complete expropriation or total destruction.”

28 This distinction can be made also in terms of the distinction between an antecedent versus a consequent will.
30 Cf. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics III.3 on what is up to us.
31 It also prevents a person from having the casuist excuse of appeal to the doctrine of double effect, sc., of willing only one of the consequences when she knows full well that the other consequence will follow. Cf. Alison MacIntyre, “Doing away with Double Effect”, Ethics 11.2 (2001), pp. 222–225; 225, n. 12.
32 To be violent, such acts would also have to be forceful in the sense described above. Still instances that were successful would tend to be forceful, as they would have great consequences. Cf. John Lewis, The Case Against Pacifism (London, 1939), pp. 109–110.
34 To be violent, such acts would also have to be forceful in the sense described above. Cf. John Lewis, The Case Against Pacifism (London, 1939), pp. 109–110.

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