

# Is Poverty Violence?<sup>1</sup>

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We will before too long be observing the fortieth anniversary of a series of events connected with the political turbulence of the late 1960s. Many of these anniversaries are of violent events, such as the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy. There is a related philosophical anniversary of sorts. In that same period, a cluster of philosophical writings on the subject of violence appeared, writings which were in large part a response to that series of events.<sup>2</sup> Many of these writings were part of the first great wave of “applied philosophy,” the first systematic attempt on the part of analytic philosophers to examine the normative and conceptual dimensions of matters of public policy and practical morality. Certainly, the political turmoil of the 1960s was one of the principal causes of this “applied turn,” which continues to this day.

This essay continues some of the lines of inquiry broached in these earlier writings on violence. In particular, I consider whether poverty, as a form of injustice, can be considered violence. Is poverty a form of violence? I am not concerned directly with the normative question whether violence is justified.

To begin, a likely objection to my project should be mentioned. Is not the question whether poverty is violence a merely verbal matter? Is not the dispute over this question simply part of a rhetorical battle between defenders of the *status quo* and their radical critics over the moral high ground involved in the use of the pejorative term “violence?” This objection can be put more sharply. Since I am assuming the *prima facie* unjustifiability of poverty, implicit in the claim that it is a form of injustice, there does not even seem to be much rhetorical advantage to extending the concept of violence to cover poverty. So what is the point of the exercise? I hope to show that the answer to the question whether poverty is violence has implications beyond the uncontroversial claim that poverty is unjustified.

Because I take poverty to be a form of injustice, I understand poverty in a special sense, not equivalent simply to being poor. Briefly, I understand poverty to be a case where someone’s being poor is not voluntarily chosen, where the society has the resources to put an end to that person’s being poor, and where the person is so poor that he or she does not have the resources to lead a minimally decent life. While these conditions are vaguely stated, especially the third, there is no need to attempt to specify them further, because there are millions of people who clearly are in poverty under these conditions, even as vaguely stated. This entitles us to regard their being poor as an injustice. The implicit principle of justice involved here, which I lack the space to elaborate and defend, is that everyone is due some minimal level of resources necessary for a decent existence, when the society can afford to provide it. Fortunately, it is not an

implausible principle. In any case, it is about people who are poor in this sense that I ask whether poverty is violence.

Is poverty violence? The philosophers who have written on violence disagree on the answer. Robert Audi argues that it is a conceptual confusion to regard “discrimination and exclusion,” and he would presumably include poverty as well, as forms of violence, insofar as they are “peacefully maintained.”<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, Ronald Miller argues that neglecting someone in need, which fits my characterization of poverty, cannot count as violence, since “neglecting cannot be done with great force.”<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Robert Holmes speaks of “the debilitating effects...of ghetto schools upon young children” as a form of violence, even though involving no “physical violence.”<sup>5</sup> Presumably, Holmes would include poverty as a form of violence as well, because it has the kind of debilitating effects that ghetto schools have. Likewise, John Harris defends what he refers to as the Marxist view that “deaths caused by the indifference and neglect of society or its rulers must be seen as being as much a part of human violence as the violent acts of revolutionaries.”<sup>6</sup> Since poverty is the main way through which such deaths occur, poverty, on this view, would clearly be a form of violence.

What is the source of this disagreement? Consider some proffered definitions of violence. According to Ted Honderich, an act of violence “is a use of considerable or destroying force against people or things, a use of force which offends against a norm.”<sup>7</sup> Miller proposes that an act of violence, in part, “is any act [that] involves great force [and] is in itself capable of injuring, damaging, or destroying...”<sup>8</sup> What these and other definitions of violence have in common is that they posit two features as characteristic of violence, roughly, that an act of violence (1) involves the application of vigorous force and (2) results in serious harm or injury to human beings (or their property). The difference is that those who would reject the claim that poverty is violence view each of these features as necessary for there to be an act of violence, while those who would regard poverty as violence do not. Thus, Audi and Miller argue that discrimination and neglect—and presumably poverty—cannot be forms of violence because they are peacefully maintained, and so do not involve the application of vigorous force. One of the necessary features is lacking. On the other hand, those who would regard poverty as a form of violence treat the second feature as necessary, but not the first. Thus, Newton Garver argues: “Violence in human affairs is much more closely connected with the idea of violation than with the idea of force. What is fundamental about violence is that a person is violated.”<sup>9</sup>

The question whether poverty is violence comes down, then, to the question whether the application of vigorous force is a primary, necessary feature of violence, or secondary, unnecessary feature. How is this matter to be decided? One could appeal to ordinary usage or linguistic intuition. But this does not seem to be of much help, because those on both sides of the question make cogent appeals to usage to support their views. Because appeal to usage seems to leave the matter unresolved, it would be helpful to have a different kind of argument to try to settle the matter. In the following, I present such an argument. I show that vigorous force is not a necessary feature of instances of violence, and hence, that it is wrong to reject the claim that poverty is a form of violence on the

grounds that the harms resulting from poverty are not brought about through the application of vigorous force. I show that vigorous force is not a necessary feature of violence by making a plausible case that this feature is, or is better seen as, secondary to—and derivative from—the primary feature of violence, namely, the doing of serious personal person-caused harm.

Consider the role of norms in our understanding of what violence is. Honderich claims that applying vigorous force to a person, even force resulting in serious harm, is not normally regarded as violence unless it “offends against a norm.”<sup>10</sup> I am not sure what Honderich has in mind with this phrase, but it may be this. Sports such as football and hockey allow or require rough physical contact between players. At the same time, each sport recognizes certain forms of physical contact that are not allowed, that are, indeed, penalized. Say I interact with my hockey opponent in a way that results in his receiving a concussion. If my interaction is a normal body check, resulting in his falling and hitting his head on the ice, we would be disinclined, despite the vigorous force applied and the harm done, to call it an act of violence. But if the interaction involved my braining him with my stick, we would naturally call this an act of violence. The reason is that the first form of vigorous force is allowed by the rules, is a legitimate use of force, while the second is not. In the second case my action offends against a norm of hockey, in particular the rule against high sticking; in the first case, my action, a simple case of body checking, does not. In other words, violence is restricted to illegitimate force, legitimacy being defined by the relevant norms. Legitimate force, even when it results in serious harm, is not regarded as violence.

Our concern, however, is not sports violence, but political or social violence, where the norm in question is often a legal norm.<sup>11</sup> In the case of political or social violence, the distinction between the use of force which offends against a norm and that which does not conceals a deep asymmetry. In the case of legal norms, unlike the sports case, different norms apply to the different parties, in particular, to citizens, on the one hand, and to government officials, such as police, on the other hand. Legal norms allow or require government officials to engage in various activities, often involving the application of force against others, in defense of the social order. The norms deny these forms of activity to citizens. If a group of citizens protesting government policies engages in acts of vigorous force against persons or property, these acts would be against legal norms, and hence would be regarded as illegitimate, as acts of violence. But the acts of the police in seeking to counter the demonstrators, even if more vigorously forceful and harmful, would generally not be against legal norms, so would be treated as legitimate uses of force, and, to that extent, would not be regarded as acts of violence. In some cases, of course, the norms define limits, as in sports, beyond which government officials cannot go in their use of force to maintain social order. Corresponding to the distinction between body checking and high-sticking, there may be a norm-defined distinction in the actions of police between acceptable and excessive force, the latter being regarded as a form of “police brutality” or violence. But the general point is that vigorous force causing harm is less likely to be regarded as violence if done by officials in defense of the social order, since such activity is not generally against the norms which define that social order.

But one can draw a distinction between positive and ideal norms, between the norms that actually exist and those that ought to exist. It is always possible to criticize a set of norms and the practice constituted by those norms in terms of an idea of a better set of norms and a better practice. Radical critique, a redrawing of the bounds of legitimacy, is a permanent option. In the sports case, for example, one need not be bound to respect the distinction drawn by the game rules between acts that are violent and acts that are not violent. One can treat body checking and high-sticking as violent by categorizing the whole game as violent. One can, thus, condemn the whole practice of hockey in favor of some other (unspecified) sports activity whose rules would not allow the sort of vigorous force allowed in hockey. The political analogue is obvious. One is free to reject the norm-imposed distinction between the force demonstrators use and the force the police use by rejecting the social order the police activities maintain, treating their activity as illegitimate, as a form of repression. For example, critics referred to the activities of the Chicago police during the 1968 Democratic National Convention as a police riot.

It remains to be explained what import this discussion of the role of norms has on the question whether vigorous force is a necessary condition for violence. That norms (whether positive or ideal) create a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate uses of force shows only that vigorous force (along with harm done) is not a sufficient condition for violence, not that it is not a necessary condition. But what this discussion does is to put the notion of the use of force in a broader context. One of the main functions of legal and social norms is to create and maintain order, in the sense of providing individuals with some level of personal security from attack or aggression by other members of society. They seek to avoid the harms of social disorder. Because the disruption of personal security when social order breaks down usually takes the form of attack or aggression, it generally involves the application of vigorous force, as in the paradigm case when one is beaten by a mugger. Many people, in the spirit of Hobbes, see the creation and maintenance of social order as not just one important function of legal and social norms, but as their paramount function. From this perspective, the serious harms that befall people at the hands of others are generally acts involving the application of vigorous force. Due to this concomitance between serious personal harms caused by other people and the application of vigorous force, such harms tend to be viewed as involving the (illegitimate) application of vigorous force. Thus, when the causings of such harms are labeled as acts of violence, it is natural to regard vigorous force as being a necessary condition for an act of violence.

But the distinction between positive and ideal norms is based on the assumption that social order is not the only important value that norms can achieve. Two systems of legal and social norms may achieve the same degree of orderliness, but not be equally valuable. There is a distinction between good and bad – just and unjust – social order. An ideal set of norms would achieve not simply order, but good order. The radical critique of an existing social order is based on an appeal to the injustice of that order. Such an appeal involves reference to other kinds of harms caused by that social order, harms different from the harms of disorder which the social order may successfully avoid. Some of these harms of social order involve the application of vigorous force, such as bodychecking in

hockey and certain police activities, defined as legitimate under the existing norms but as illegitimate under the ideal norms to which the radical critique appeals. But most of the harms of social order do not involve the application of vigorous force. The basis of a radical critique is that, while the existing social order may serve to keep individual citizens from aggressing against each other, it also serves to maintain an unjust distribution of power and wealth in society. The harms of injustice come from this maldistribution, which is normally maintained without the direct application of vigorous force.

One of the primary injustices of a bad social order is poverty. Poverty results in a whole range of serious physical and psychological harms: higher risks of disease, shortened life spans, stunted mental and emotional development, and inadequate opportunity to lead a meaningful life. These are primarily institutionally imposed harms, because they are the result of the enforcement of systems of social, political, legal, and economical rules. But, though the harms are institutional, they are caused by individuals, in the sense that the acts of other individuals could avoid them. It is individuals who enforce the unjust legal norms of the social order and refrain from seeking to change these norms to achieve a fairer redistribution of wealth and power. It is the radical critique of a social order which calls to our attention these harms, the injustice they involve, and our individual and collective responsibility for them. But my point is that the radical critique does more than this. It implies that, if violence involves the transgression of a norm, then institutional violence may occur even in the absence of vigorous force. In pointing out the harms of social order, harms other than those of social disorder, the radical critique demonstrates the mere contingency of the link between the causing of harm and the application of vigorous force. This allows an extension of the notion of violence to cover such harms, and so reveals that vigorous force is not a necessary condition for violence.

In summary, my argument is that the connection between personal person-caused harm and the application of vigorous force is an artifact of attending exclusively to the harms of social disorder and the value of an existing set of social and legal norms in avoiding those harms. The connection is that the harms of social disorder generally and paradigmatically involve the application of vigorous force. When the causes of those harms are labeled acts of violence, it is natural that the application of vigorous force would come to be seen as one of the necessary conditions for the label. But once attention is shifted from positive to ideal norms by a radical critique of the existing social order, the harms of that social order are revealed and an extension of the notion of violence to the cause of these harms breaks the link with vigorous force. In other words, the application of vigorous force as a condition for violence is derivative from the principal condition of violence, which is the causing of personal person-caused harm, in the context of a focus on exclusively positive norms. Once we go beyond this context, the application of vigorous force is no longer seen as the medium through which such harm inevitably occurs, and hence ceases to be seen as a necessary condition for violence. As a result, because poverty is a primary harm of social order, it is appropriate to count it as a form of violence, despite the general absence of vigorous force in the actions through which it is caused.

But this account, however adequate it may be, does not completely deflect the objection that the question whether poverty is violence is simply a verbal matter. The objection can now take the following form. Granted that there are serious personal person-caused harms beyond those of social disorder, and granted that these harms do not generally involve the application of vigorous force, still, why extend the notion of violence to these harms? While my account makes this extension a plausible one, there may be pragmatic grounds against it.

The pragmatic argument for the extension must be cast in terms of the moral continuity between the harms of social disorder and the harms of social order. In terms of moral seriousness or importance, these harms are on an equal footing. Only the blindness of an unreflective defense of the *status quo* would lead one to fail to appreciate this. The term “violence” is a very important term of moral evaluation, moral condemnation, so to fail to extend it to the harms of social order would be to fail to recognize their moral continuity with the harms of social disorder. To make clear that each kind of harm is equally worthy of moral condemnation, we should extend over both of them our vocabulary of serious moral condemnation, which includes prominently the term “violence.” This point can be made by discussing the connection between the terms “violence” and “violation.”<sup>12</sup> It seems likely that the terms have the same root. An act of physical assault is certainly a violation of the victim’s humanity, and it is for this reason that it is called an act of violence and is subject to serious moral condemnation. But to keep someone in an enforced state of poverty, with all of the harms that involves, harms which seriously compromise the potential that person has for a decent life, is also a violation of his or her humanity. If anything, an enforced state of poverty is a worse violation of a person’s humanity than most physical assaults, given, the seriousness and long-term nature of poverty’s consequences. To refuse the term “violence” to such harm, restricting the term to acts against a positive norm, is to risk mistaking the violation of a person’s humanity with the violation of such a norm. In fact, those who morally condemn violence while restricting its scope in this way may be guilty of just this equivocation on “violation.”

The basis for extending the term “violence” from the harms of social disorder to the harms of social order is similar to that for extending the term “injustice” from the unfair application of existing rules (formal injustice) to the unfairness of the rules themselves (substantive injustice). In both cases, one must recognize that these strong terms of moral condemnation cannot be bound in their application to an unreflective acceptance of existing rules or norms. In the case of injustice, one must recognize, through a radical critique of existing rules, that unfairness can result from the scrupulous application of those rules, as it can from an incorrect application of them. “Injustice” should be applicable to both forms of unfairness. Likewise, in the case of violence, a radical critique of existing rules can reveal that the social order under those rules may result in a violation of a person as much as social disorder would. So, “violence” should be applicable to both forms of violation.<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

1 This essay originally appeared in Deane Curtin and Robert Litke (eds.), *Institutional Violence* (Amsterdam—Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 5-12.

2 See, for example, Robert L. Holmes, “Violence and Nonviolence,” in *Violence*, ed. Jerome A. Shaffer

(New York: David McKay, 1971), pp. 101-135; Bernard Harrison, “Violence and the Rule of Law,” in

*Violence*, ed. Shaffer, pp. 137-176; Robert Audi, “On the Meaning and Justification of Violence” in

*Violence*, ed. Shaffer, pp. 45-99; and Ronald B. Miller, “Violence, Force, and Coercion” in

*Violence*, ed. Shaffer, pp. 9-44; Robert Paul Wolff, “On Violence,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 66 (1969), pp. 601-616; John

Harris, “The Marxist Conception of Violence,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 3:2 (Winter 1974), pp. 192-

220; Newton Garver, “What Violence Is,” *The Nation* (24 June 1968), pp. 819-822; Hannah Arendt, *On*

*Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1969); and Ted Honderich, *Political Violence* (Ithaca,

N.Y.,: Cornell University Press, 1976).

3 Audi, “On the Meaning and Justification of Violence,” p. 66.

4 Miller, “Violence, Force, and Coercion,” p. 20.

5 Holmes, “Violence and Nonviolence,” p. 110.

6 Harris, “The Marxist Conception of Violence,” p. 192.

7 Honderich, *Political Violence*, p. 98.

8 Miller, “Violence, Force and Coercion,” p. 25.

9 Garver, “What Violence Is,” p. 819.

10 Honderich, *Political Violence*, p. 98.

11 *Ibid.*

12 See discussions by Garver, “What Violence Is,” pp. 819-822; and Holmes, “Violence and Nonviolence,”

pp. 110-113.

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