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¹ Based on lecture at a Trinity Symposium, Carl F. H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL, April 15, 2014.

Jordan J. Ballor, Research Fellow, Acton Institute for the Study of Religion & Liberty, 98 E. Fulton Street, Suite 101, Grand Rapids, MI 49503.



ENRIQUE DUSSEL AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY: VIOLENCE OR DIALOGUE?

Miguel Ángel Quintana-Paz
Universidad Europea Miguel de Cervantes, Spain

For centuries, various disciplines have tried to tackle the topic of how legitimate it is to use violence in order to solve social problems. One of the most recent interdisciplinary approaches, most successful in present-day Latin America, is the so-called "Ethics of Liberation," designed by Enrique Dussel. Based on the Theology of Liberation, this theory goes beyond the limits of theology as a discipline and pleads for three ethical criteria that every political revolution must fulfill to use violence in a legitimate way. The first is a formal criterion, which basically takes after the ideal dialogue situation endorsed by Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas, and purports to be rooted in yet another discipline, linguistics. The second is a material criterion, defined as the upshot of an acceptable welfare for all citizens, thus intimately linked with the discipline of economics and political philosophy. The third is a criterion of feasibility, which makes a revolt legitimate if, and only if, it has a reasonable possibility of succeeding; hence strategic issues take a leading role. This essay contends that each of these criteria is conceptually incompatible with violence. Hence, Dussel's arguments involve multiple contradictions as he aims to justify the use of violence precisely with these interdisciplinary criteria.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ROLE OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Theoretical reflections on social oppression, poverty, and the means to alleviate both, are among the outstanding contributions that Spanish and Portuguese-speaking thinkers from diverse disciplines have made in the twentieth century to world intellectual debate. Certainly, doomed socio-economic infrastructures led them to treat this topic with special urgency. Among intellectual proposals from various disciplines, one that will be remembered, especially following the General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín (1968), is "Liberation Theology" (Gutiérrez 1972)—an attempt to connect theological reflection with urgent dilemmas in

today's world. In practical terms, this attempt produced arguably the largest political-social and intra-ecclesiastical consequences and reactions regarding Catholic thought in the 1970s-1980s. One of these consequences, as Paul E. Sigmund vividly put it, was that many Catholic theologians "moved one step further and began to call for radical solutions to Latin American social problems That it was a radicalism linked to the oldest and strongest continent-wide institutional structure in Latin America--the Catholic Church--made it all the more challenging--and, for some, threatening" (1990: 6).

The intellectual repercussions across disciplines of this thought are now well-known, too, from the work of authors like Jon Sobrino, Juan Luis Segundo, Ernesto Cardenal, Paulo Freire, Leonardo Boff, Ignacio Ellacuría, Pedro Casaldáliga, Frei Betto, Jung Mo Sung, Diego Irarrazaval in theology, education, history, philosophy, political science, ethnology, and economics (Richard 2008), to the occasional support for this theory by notable authors working beyond Latin America, like the theologian Karl Rahner (Girardi 1986), the economist Mansoob Murshed (1999), and the Gender Studies scholar Marcela Althaus-Reid (2003). The theoretical repercussion of Liberation Theology considered here focuses on the development of an interdisciplinary framework that the Argentine Enrique D. Dussel has constructed over the years (1973-93), mainly in Mexico, known as an Ethics of Liberation or Liberation Ethics ("LE"). A general approach was presented by Dussel himself in a book with the same title, *Liberation Ethics* (1998), the main reference point for the reflections that follow. These reflections seek to delve into LE by means of a notion that not only illuminates many of its theoretical developments, but also refers to one of the most noticeable practical measures proposed by LE: violence, including the more than anecdotal relationship of LE with the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN).

"LE" AND JUSTIFICATION OF VIOLENCE

Dussel does not defend violence *per se*, of course, but is obliged to make a justification of it in war and revolution inasmuch as he considers it a means to the end that he and LE advocate: the liberation of "the oppressed." One should not conclude from certain somewhat ambiguous statements that Dussel praises violence for its own sake--as when he talks nostalgically about today's "fatal quietude, with no possible revolution on the horizon" (1998: 374). Dussel quickly clarifies that, for him, "revolution and war are certainly

dramatic events" that cause "inevitable suffering and countless innocent victims" (1998: 374). These concessions to the more politically correct pacifist discourse of the times do not lead Dussel, however, to renounce completely his support for such violent "means of liberation" as war and revolution. Dussel is certainly aware of the possibility of non-violent revolutions (Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr.), which nevertheless he rejects in most cases (1998: 377). Dussel does not even renounce supporting violent "means of liberation" after explicitly citing texts such as that of Hannah Arendt, in which she argues that the political theories of revolution and war "can only be a justification of violence, and what is the glorification or justification of violence as such is not political but antipolitical" (1990: 11). In fact, when Dussel quotes Arendt's dictum he does not do so, as could be supposed, to condemn the use of violence in the common space--the political sphere. Ironically, Dussel quotes Arendt to try to show exactly the opposite of what this thinker meant: that one can justify (politically, in Arendt's terms) violent conflict without justifying ("antipolitically") violence.

The way to pull off this trick is the one adopted by almost all verbal defenses of violence: accusing "the others" (those against whom one is waging war or revolution) of the only real violence. To accomplish this, Dussel strives throughout two paragraphs and an outline to change the usual Spanish vocabulary (and by extension, English) "slightly" more to his taste. Dussel restricts the use of the word "violence" only to describe those regimes (or revolutions) that are, in his opinion, illegitimate, while legitimate revolutions (or regimes) should, according to him, no longer be called "violent" in any possible way, because they only use "legitimate coercion." As Dussel argues: "The existing institution . . . should rely on a certain legitimate coercion that will allow it to channel those who are not ready to fulfill the validly accepted agreements" (1998: 375). Thus, in supporting Marxist revolutionaries like Fidel Castro or the FSLN, defending the priest Father Hidalgo in New Spain, or George Washington in the English colonies of North America, Dussel does not see himself succumbing to Arendt's "antipolitics" by defending violence (1998: 376-82). Rather, he is "only" supporting "legitimate coercion," whereas those who would be violent would be the regimes against which these leaders rose up, since the action of those regimes was "illegitimate" coercion.

Therefore, for LE, it becomes most important to determine when a political order or revolution may be considered legitimate-coercive, and when

it should be considered illegitimate-violent. Dussel offers three criteria for this throughout his extensive work. The first is called *formal*, that is, according to Karl-Otto Apel (1987) and Jürgen Habermas (1976), that which views legitimacy as “the consensual acceptability of a political order shared by the symmetrically argumentative members in a community of argumentation” (Dussel 1998: 378). That is, the legitimacy of a violent action (or of an established system) would be achieved, according to this first criterion, as long as that action was the result of a decision taken by the members of a community by consensus, after a democratic dialogue in which they all can equally participate and in which all are led by the “forceless force of the best argument” (Habermas 1984: 161). However, to this first legitimating requirement must be added a second, *material* criterion, which according to Dussel is “missing in Weber and Habermas,” and in general in philosophers of “advanced societies” (1998: 378). According to this *material* criterion, the legitimacy of a political order (or revolutionary movement) must reside as well in its “ability to produce, reproduce and develop the human life of each of its members . . . on an acceptable or tolerable level” (Dussel 1998: 378). Finally, in Dussel’s view, a third criterion must be required of regimes or revolutions to prevent them from falling into utopian fantasies: the criterion of *feasibility*, of the real practical possibility of a revolution or a political system to succeed in a given historical situation. If the first criterion has a remarkable Apelian-Habermasian philosophical-linguistic flavor, and the second a clear economic and Aristotelian one, this third criterion is mainly based in strategic considerations indebted to Dussel’s intellectual exchange with Franz Hinkelammert (2002).

Thus, for Dussel, violence is legitimate (“legitimate coercion”) if, and only if: (1) the decision to use it as a means for liberating a community of the oppressed is taken by them following a dialogue in which everyone can argue in the same conditions (a potentially universal dialogue); (2) the end of this violence is to save their lives (not only in the biological sense); and (3) this salvation is feasible. Therefore, symmetrically, “a regime that kills, excludes or is of impossible empirical realization” would become “inevitably illegitimate” (Dussel 1998: 378). LE is “strictly interested” in that precise moment in which the revolution is legitimate, and the regime is not: the moment of legitimate violence against that regime (Dussel 1998: 379). Now, without questioning the three criteria of legitimacy that Dussel proposes, or his euphemistic (*ad hoc*? Orwellian?) naming of certain types of violence as “legitimate coercion,” that moment of “legitimate” violence is impossible on

Dussel’s own terms. None of the criteria that Dussel proposes can be fulfilled if a revolution uses arms and death, because there is an essential contradiction between each of these criteria and violence, although Dussel unflinchingly strives to defend at the same time those criteria and the use of violence or, worse, tries to defend violence by way of those criteria.

WHY VIOLENCE CANNOT BE JUSTIFIED PER DUSSEL

The question arises why none of the criteria that Dussel demands of a violent revolution can be fulfilled if the revolution is violent, if it causes death, injuries or destruction. The *formal* criterion of a symmetrical agreement, to begin with, is radically incompatible with the use of armed struggle, for two reasons. In the first place, it is difficult to defend, if one wishes to be realistic, that within the community of the oppressed that decides to form the revolutionary group there are real chances of establishing a totally free, dialogical, and symmetrical accord among all its members. Utilitarianism and the desire to be effective usually make the ringleaders of any serious armed group unlikely to allow either internal dissension or excessive attention to questions of form (considered “empty bourgeois formalism” in the Marxist lexicon). In real life, members of the “community of the oppressed,” especially those in favor of non-violent struggle (*ahimsa*) or simply against the use of violence, have little possibility of expressing their dissenting arguments in a free and symmetrical dialogue with the leaders of an armed group or a revolution. Dussel is not totally unaware of this dilemma, but seems to dismiss its importance when he talks about it as a simple need of “organization with a certain internal discipline” (1998: 379). Alas, this “internal discipline” of armed groups is usually at odds with the real possibility of dialogically questioning its methods from within. And, without due dialogue, no legitimacy may be ascribed to that armed group precisely in Dussel’s terms.

This problem in Dussel’s proposal becomes clearer if one looks at the examples he provides as paradigms of “legitimate” violent and successful revolutions. For example, the wars of independence in Latin America, mentioned several times in rather praise-worthy terms (Dussel 1998: 376-82), were never carried out, as Dussel seems to imply, with the democratic agreement of all the inhabitants of all the Latin American nations (the alleged “oppressed communities”). There was, rather, a divergence of opinion in all of them about the advisability or not of maintaining their ties with the Iberian

Peninsula, and what kind of ties (in some cases, with a majority not in favor of independence). And this internal disagreement, instead of being resolved through arguments in a symmetrical dialogue, was taken to arms on both sides, as Dussel forgets to mention repeatedly. Habermas' or Apel's criteria are hard to find in these examples of presumably "legitimate" revolutions.

The second problem of Dussel's *formal* criterion goes beyond this difficulty of fulfilling it *within* the oppressed community, and the armed groups that pretend to liberate it. It is incompatible with violence because of the effects it provokes *outside* that oppressed community. It is easy to see that those against whom violence is directed would not be included in the symmetrical and universal dialogue that the formal criterion demands. Therefore, this dialogue could not be considered either valid or "universal" (what agent would consent to a decision to have violence directed at oneself?). The revolutionary group that uses violence would then become, according to LE itself, the oppressor of those it attacks, since it excludes them from any possible "universal" agreements in the most radical way possible--by killing them.

This way, an armed group turns out to be precisely what Dussel, under the influence of Emmanuel Levinas (1961), frequently calls an "oppressive totality" (although he always does so by reference to other cases, not to the armed groups that he likes): a totality that impedes dialogue within the group (with the "pacifists" or dissenters of the armed group) and excludes certain determined "others" (those labeled as "enemies" or "oppressors"). This fact would place the armed group, always according to LE's own principles (its "formal criterion"), in a position of illegitimacy at least as reprehensible as that of the hegemonic system it rises up against. The result of this could not be more hopeless: this hegemonic system could thus be considered to have good ethical motives, even according to LE itself, to violently fight against the rebels and their "oppressive totality" (maybe directly, via the army or police, maybe indirectly, via paratroopers). We would, then, be faced with the paradoxical (and lamentable) situation of two human groups mutually destroying each other with good ethical reasons "in their own eyes," "for themselves," as Dussel somewhat recognizes (1998: 382). But is that the real aim of ethics, to provide good reasons for reciprocal massacre?

What about Dussel's "material criterion," with its economic and Aristotelian undertones? It is reasonably clear that this criterion (the

possibility of a fruitful and meaningful development and reproduction of life) is not fulfilled in those against whom violence is exerted (even though they may be "oppressors"). Those who are the victims of the violence unleashed by the "revolutionaries," their "attacks," and their "armed actions," have little possibility of life (not to mention its fruitful development and reproduction, as Dussel likes to add). This is so evident that it needs little further explanation. The use of violence in a revolution or war automatically cancels any possibility of fulfilling this criterion if one takes into account all humans involved in that violence, also the victims of that revolution or war.

Furthermore, this "material" criterion suffers from two serious theoretical drawbacks. In the first place, this criterion requires the government to fulfill an "obligation" to provide life on "an acceptable level," if it wants to be legitimate as a government. The requirement goes so far as to affirm that "the failure to comply with this material requirement ipso facto makes the political regimes of 'poor' countries 'illegitimate', even if they have the formal aspiration of being 'democratic'" (Dussel 1998: 378). Let us consider the implications of this kind of statements. Imagine the following scenario: a country is going through a bad economic crisis, or suffering from economic problems it inherited, or simply there are citizens dissatisfied with their standard of living (and dissatisfaction is never unusual among human beings). Then, according to Dussel's proposal, the leaders elected at the polls should be removed from office on the spot ("ipso facto," as he likes to say). And the same over and over again, until the country becomes "rich" and, therefore, its government is, in Dussel's opinion, "legitimate." The political instability thus proposed not only seems scarcely earnest; it would be extremely dangerous, and likely bring serious harm to the governed people and, more precisely, to the economically worst-off among them. They would live under the distress of a never-ending change of governments, a continuous de-legitimation of every new elected president and administration if they do not solve ipso facto the economic ailments of their country.

In fact, it is hard to understand why Dussel reserves such a tortuous process as immediate dismissal, the illegitimacy of elections, and the volatility of all governments only for "poor" countries, which have enough problems already (1998: 378). Nor is it clear why, at one point, he declares Salvador Allende's government "legitimate," if (according to this same criterion of ipso facto illegitimacy of LE) the president that General Pinochet brutally took out would have had a government record worthy of an even earlier destitution--

there was a rapid decline in the Chileans' standard of living during his mandate, with an inflation rate of 600 percent in 1973 (Falcoff 1989). Nor does Dussel tell us why a simple tax imposed on tea by the British Crown threatened nothing less than the *life* of the thirteen American colonies in such a way as to justify a war of independence as "self-defense" (1998: 376). Or, whether Australia or Canada, which did not exercise at that time their "self-defense" against "British attacks" on their life, were in any sense "dead" (and if they were, why do they now figure among the most developed countries on the planet?). Is Dussel trying to judge "ethically" historical processes that are too complex to be proclaimed in toto legitimate or not?

Now, the second drawback of this vague "material" criterion, intimately connected with the first, is the fact that it unabashedly attributes the basis of political legitimacy to the success of economic policy. It thus merges politics and economics, but with a clear predominance of the latter. Something which, curiously, is not far from the technocratic theses of some pro-market ideologues, who postulate that policy should be subordinated to the proper management of the economy (the only valid policies are those aimed at producing wealth, that is, economic success). This paradoxical parallelism with pro-market authors would lead Dussel, if he is to be consistent with his own ideas, to have to declare some rulers illegitimate according to LE, like it or not: rulers who are not disagreeable to him, but whose economic successes are more than doubtful (for example, Fidel Castro in Cuba, or Allende in Chile 1973).

Finally, the *feasibility* criterion of a legitimate revolution cannot be fulfilled if it includes violence since, given the above contradictions, it is clear that an armed but legitimate struggle is a *contradictio in terminis*: it will always constitute an attack on life (*material* criterion), and impede a consensus argued by all the participants in an equitable dialogical situation (*formal* criterion). Therefore, whenever violence is used for political action, that which is sought (and which possibly will come to pass) in the name of legitimate revolution will be different from what really conforms to LE and its criteria of legitimacy. Thus, a "legitimate" revolution will never be feasible. The examples that Dussel provides of revolutions that appear to be "feasible" only corroborate this impossibility of joining feasibility, legitimacy, and violence. Nicaragua after Anastasio Somoza or Cuba after Fulgencio Bautista, which could seem to be "feasible" revolutions since they were "successful" (in the sense that the previous dictator, Somoza or Bautista, was

overthrown), were not really legitimate revolutions if one adheres to the formal and material criteria designed by Dussel himself, and thus were not really successful nor feasible. Even if one accepts success as a simple "raising to power of the ringleaders of the armed group," one cannot speak of a great "feasibility" of revolutions in general in Latin America, considering the overwhelming density of armed groups that arose there during the second half of the twentieth century, and the scarcity of countries (Nicaragua and Cuba, two small nations) where they were "successful"—and in the case of Nicaragua, a quite brief "success" in time (Cuzán 1992).

CONCLUSION

This essay attempts to show the major contradiction that Enrique Dussel incurs when he defends that there can be armed revolutions that are respectful of the three criteria of legitimacy he proposes. This contradiction might well serve as an example of the multiple "internal philosophical contradictions" that Liberation Theology in general "had to face" (Lynch 1994a, b). And, one can licitly think that from this contradiction derive all the picturesque examples reviewed here: as classic logic would say, *ex contradictione quodlibet* ("from a contradiction, anything follows"). Perhaps the most undesirable of the consequences of Dussel's way of thinking is the fact that his theory serves to legitimize violent struggle on both sides of a political or social dispute at the same time. It is true that this may not be uncommon in other theories that try to legitimize as well the use of violence: the same theoretical suppositions are often invoked on both sides in a conflict, each one deducing from them, however, "their own right" to use violence. Thus, this kind of theories not only fail to stop a violent confrontation, but often reaffirm each of the opposing sides in their legitimacy in the destruction of each other (Quintana-Paz 2009). If LE proponents want to have the future that contemporary defenders of it foresee (Petrella 2006), such contradictions need to be addressed and, if possible, solved.

It is interesting to see how other philosophical approaches based, as LE, on the idea of "the other," take a totally different attitude towards violence, and reject it in any case. "Pacifist" approaches like this may be seen in examples of interdisciplinary thought such as the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1976) and Gianni Vattimo (1987). This hermeneutics highlights the fact that violence is *always* an irrational interruption of dialogue, and therefore what is reasonable, and less alien to human reason, is never to close off the

effort to understand the other (and ourselves *through* the other). Whereas LE assesses peaceful means only with regard to their efficiency (Dussel 1998: 377), these other perspectives simply show the essential link of our “rational being” with our “always being open to dialogue,” the essential link of reason with peace, the essential incompatibility of reason with totalities closed off to an excluded “other.” It is easy to perceive a debt of this way of thinking to such authors as Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, Ernst Bloch, and certain passages of Jean-Paul Sartre (Vattimo 1983). All pacifism is defended regardless of whether the absence of violence is “useful” or not, contrary to Dussel’s focus on usefulness. But these theoretical developments might well leave one with a sense of dissatisfaction. In the real world, it is not uncommon that at least one side in a potentially violent conflict is not interested in dialogue or peace. Should we be faithful to our “rational being” and be “open to dialogue,” as these authors commend, even when someone is already exterminating human beings? Would it be “rational” to wait for a violent aggressor to “engage in a dialogue,” or would it be simply utopian (and irresponsible)? Hermeneutic philosophers and their pacifist version of thinking about the question of “the other” look as little promising as Dussel’s version, although both currents claim the necessity of addressing that question as the main target of contemporary thought (Saladino-García 2010).

Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that quite probably the “claim for otherness” that Dussel (2006) has repeatedly expressed as one of the main features of his thinking is not a good guiding principle to determine when it is legitimate to use violence—whether in Dussel’s version of this “claim” or in that developed by hermeneutic authors. Dussel seems to forget to care about “the others” in violence (that is, *all* the victims, those who suffer it, be it “legitimate” or not, according to Dussel’s criteria). This is so because the “guilty” victim, the “hated oppressor,” is also an “other.” And hermeneutic authors do not seem to care enough about victims in general, and their “otherness,” in order to engage in their active defense when these “others” are under violent attack. In fact, in recent years, some have radically changed their views and adopted a quite pro-violent, revolutionary stance (Vattimo 2011), not very dissimilar to Dussel’s—a move that surely makes them sound less utopian, but not more coherent, as this essay tried to show.

The “claim for otherness” that Dussel has always supported was wrapped in some of his earlier writings in a philosophical language not especially clear. Obscure assertions like “the revelation of the other is shown in my world as

a creation of the impossible from my selfness,” were not unusual (Dussel 1973: 78). In this sense, the challenge that Dussel accepted in more recent works is not to be overlooked. Dussel finally undertook to make a clear assessment of what this “claim for otherness” implies in practical terms, and in relation to a clear-cut political issue—violence. And he did so by introducing fruitful connections to philosophies like those of Habermas, Apel, and Aristotle, quite alien, *prima facie*, to this “claim for otherness.” The unclear 1970s language has given way lately to an interesting adoption of terms from new (Habermas, Apel) and old (Aristotelian) traditions. Dussel’s initial use of arcane philosophical terminology, understandable perhaps only to other philosophers, has given way to political, economic, historical, linguistic, and sociological terms that grant his theory an undeniable interdisciplinary flavor. All this has a certain relevance and merit that one should not dispute. Nonetheless, the more clear and interdisciplinary Dussel has made his point, the more clearly its deep contradictions have become apparent.

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Miguel Ángel Quintana-Paz teaches Ethics at Universidad Europea Miguel de Cervantes, Calle Julio Chevalier, 2, 47012 Valladolid, Spain.



THE EMERGENCE OF THE SELF: ROLE - TAKING AND INSIGHT

Thomas J. Scheff
University of California-Santa Barbara

The need for integration may be the single most important issue facing social science, the humanities and their sub-disciplines, especially given the scope of the social/behavioral problems facing humanity. One path toward integrating disciplines, sub-disciplines, and micro-macro levels is suggested by Spinoza's idea of part/whole methodology, moving rapidly back and forth between concrete instances and general ideas. Any discipline, sub-discipline or level can serve as a valuable stepping-off place, but to advance further, integration with at least one other viewpoint may be necessary. This essay links three hitherto separate subjects: role-taking, meditation, and a theory of emotion. The idea of role-taking plays a central part in sociological social psychology. Meditation implies the same process in terms of a self able to witness the ego. Drama theories also depend upon a witnessing self that establishes a safe zone for resolving intense emotions. All three approaches imply that the everyday ego is largely automated. In one of her novels, Virginia Woolf suggests three crucial points about automated thought: incredible speed, how it involves role-taking, and by implication, the presence of a witnessing self.

LITERARY AND SOCIAL STUDIES: PART/WHOLE METHOD

One of the first philosophers of science, Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), outlined what amounts to a method for understanding the human world. He proposed that we humans are so complex that even to begin to understand us, one needs to move rapidly between "the least parts and greatest wholes" (Sacksteder 1991: 75). What he called least parts were concrete particulars; "greatest wholes," abstract ideas, concepts and theories (Sacksteder 1991; Scheff 1997). William Blake (1820) proposed a similar idea in one sentence: "Art and science cannot exist but in minutely