Phenomenologies of Violence

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CHAPTER TWO

ON TRANSCENDENTAL VIOLENCE

Eddo Evink

Violence has always been a much debated concept in the history of philosophy, but in the course of the twentieth century a radicalization has taken place in the philosophical reflection on violence. This radicalization includes the idea that philosophical reflection is in itself a violent act. In the view of Emmanuel Levinas all rational activity as such is a violent appropriation of objects and themes. He recognizes violent forces on a transcendental level of perception and knowledge. Jacques Derrida has labelled this as 'transcendental violence'. On the one hand Derrida criticizes several aspects of Levinas' approach, but on the other hand he radicalizes this approach by discussing an even more primordial form of violence. In this article I shall first analyze what exactly their views on violence consist of (§ 1 and 2). Then a critical discussion of these approaches will follow, which will show, on the one hand, that the approaches of Levinas and Derrida are so radical that they become contradictory. One of their mistakes is that they see violence as a necessary result of finitude (§ 3). On the other hand, it will also be shown that the concept of violence cannot be discussed without reflection on its functioning on a transcendental level (§ 4).

1. Levinas: Intentionality and Violence

In his article 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite', Levinas makes a distinction between two ways of philosophical thinking, two approaches of truth: autonomy and heteronomy. In the truth of heteronomy the philosopher relates to a reality that is absolutely other; in autonomy truth means the approval of a proposition. The autonomy of the thinker expresses itself in truth. The philosophy of autonomy, in Levinas' view, is a conquest of being by man, which takes place by a reduction of the other to the same:

The conquest of being by man through history—that is the formula to which freedom, autonomy, the reduction of the Other to the Same, comes down to.¹

Levinas adds that the preference of western philosophy usually has been on the side of autonomy.² The understanding of an object takes place through the mediation of a neutral third term. The other is classified under a general concept. This reduction of the other to the same is not innocent, because here . . .

. . . all power starts. The surrender of exterior things to human liberty through their generality does not only mean, in all innocence, their comprehension, but also their taking in hand, their domestication, their possession. [...] Reason that reduces the other is an appropriation and a power.³

Reduction, possession and appropriation are the key terms in Levinas' view of knowledge and reason. In his two early short books, *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*, he discusses this appropriation in terms of light. Light, according to Levinas, is the space between subject and object. He describes the subject as independent and separated from being. The phenomena appear to the subject within a world that is the subject's world. All phenomena can be reduced to the subject, which is intentionally directed to the objects that appear for it, within the light of perception and reason:

The interval of space given by light is instantaneously absorbed by light. Light is that through which something is other than myself, but already as if it came from me.⁴

Property constitutes the world: through the light the world is given and apprehended. [...] Illuminated space is completely collected around a mind which possesses it. [...] There is a totality because it relates to an inwardness in the light.⁵

¹ E. Levinas, 'La philosophie et l'idée de l'infini', in: *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1988 [1947]), pp. 165–178; here p. 166; my translation.

² E. Levinas, 'La philosophie et l'idée de l'infini', 166; cf. idem, *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), p. 13; trans. by A. Lingis as *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 43.

³ E. Levinas, 'La philosophie et l'idée de l'infini', art. cit., p. 168; my translation.

⁴ E. Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre* (Montpellier: Fata morgana, 1979 [1948]), p. 47; trans. R. A. Cohen as *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 64.

⁵ E. Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant* (Paris: Fontaine, 1947), pp. 75–76; trans. A. Lingis as *Existence and Existents* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), pp. 40–41 (translation slightly changed).

This light of apprehension and reason is characteristic for the idea of intentionality that Levinas finds in Husserl. In fact, Levinas gives a nuanced reading of Husserl's notion of intentionality. Not all intentionality is an act of rational representation. But all intentions are indebted to certain representations that support them. Therefore, also a non-theoretical intentionality always finds representation at its basis.⁶ And thus all intentionality bears in itself a violent aspect of reduction and appropriation.

One of the most interesting and important aspects of phenomenology, however, according to Levinas, is its possibility to reach beyond this representation to a passivity that precedes it. The spirit of Husserl's work can thus lead beyond the letter, beyond his actual analyses. In the line of this movement Levinas reinterprets the notion of intentionality as a sensibility to the other and finally a responsibility for the other.⁷ But this passivity in the heart of the subject does not end the powerful and dominant threats of representation and objectification by knowledge. The relation between passive receptivity and active appropriation is ambiguous: although passivity and responsibility precede knowledge and identification, they both presuppose each other as a relation of two absolutes.

Within Levinas' analyses of the appropriation of intentionality, other nuances can be found as well, for instance in the 'economy of the self' that he describes in *Totality and Infinity*. The descriptions of the 'economy of the self' start with the subject's relations to the elemental: the enjoyment of breathing, eating and finding one's way in the world. The elements are beyond our possession and control: "... a common fund or terrain, essentially unpossessable, 'nobody's': earth, sea, light, city."⁸ Instead of controlling the elements, the subject is dependent on them: "I do not ground them in a more vast system. It is they that ground me."⁹ But since the

⁶ E. Levinas, *La théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1930), pp. 74–76, 86; trans. A. Orianne as *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 44–45, 53; idem, 'L'œuvre d'Edmund Husserl', in: *En découvrant l'existence*, op. cit., pp. 7–52: here pp. 22–24, 39; idem, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), pp. 82–84; trans. by A. Lingis as *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), pp. 65–67.

⁷ E. Levinas, 'La ruine de la représentation', 'Intentionnalité et métaphysique', 'Intentionnalité et sensation', in: *En découvrant l'existence*, op. cit., pp. 125–162; idem, *Autrement qu'être*, op. cit., pp. 29–76 (english tr., pp. 23–59); cf. F. Dastur, 'Intentionnalité et métaphysique', in: Levinas, *Positivité et transcendance*, suivi de *Lévinas et la phénoménologie*, ed. J.-L. Marion (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000), pp. 125–141.

⁸ E. Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, op. cit., p. 104 (english tr., p. 131).

⁹ Ibid., p. 111 (english tr., p. 137).

subject can freely move within the elemental, this dependence of the elements paradoxically constitutes the free sovereignty of the subject:

... not a mastery on the one hand and dependence on the other, but a mastery in this dependence. [...] Living from ... is the dependency that turns into sovereignty ...¹⁰

In the course of Levinas' analyses, the subject develops its own sovereignty and independence over and against the elements and the phenomena, through the interiorization of dwelling, the economy of labour and finally through complete reduction of the other to the same in cognitive representation. These analyses describe an increasing dominance of the exterior by the same. The dominance over the object by the subject is completed in the objectifying intentionality of representation and intelligibility:

In clarity an object which is first exterior *is given* that is, is delivered over to him who encounters it as though it had been entirely determined by him. [...] Intelligibility, characterized by clarity, is a total adequation of the thinker with what is thought, in the precise sense of a mastery exercised by the thinker upon what is thought in which the object's resistance as an exterior being vanishes. This mastery is total and as though creative ...¹¹

In all these passages Levinas does not use the word *violence*. Yet the relation between subject and object is described in terms that without doubt have features of violence: possession, power, mastery, reduction, appropriation, domestication. All these characteristics refer to necessary and inevitable aspects of representation, reasoning and knowledge. The light in which the reduction of object to subject takes place, is what makes representation and knowledge possible—it is, in Derrida's expression: *transcendental violence*. According to Levinas, in every act of representation and knowledge we violate the represented object. When this violence also turns itself toward the subject, Being manifests itself as war, as Levinas implicitly cites Heraclitus in the opening pages of the preface of *Totality and Infinity*.¹²

In the same preface, however, Levinas does use the word 'violence', but, surprisingly, not to point at the reduction of the other to same. On the contrary, it is the idea of the infinite that he describes as violent:

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 87 (english tr., p. 114).

¹¹ Ibid., p. 96 (english tr., pp. 123–124).

¹² Ibid., IX–X (english tr., pp. 21–22).

The notion of an act involves a violence essentially: the violence of transitivity, lacking in the transcendence of thought. For the transcendence of thought remains closed in itself despite all its adventures—which in the last analysis are purely imaginary, or are adventures traversed as by Ulysses: on the way home. What, in action, breaks forth as essential violence is the surplus of being over the thought that claims to contain it, the marvel of the idea of infinity.¹³

The real transcendental violence, accordingly, is the violence of the infinite other who breaks into my world. It is not by accident that Levinas in his later work also uses violent metaphors to describe my relation to the other, like ‘trauma’ and ‘obsession’. Nevertheless, the ethical relation to the other, in Levinas’ view the origin of all meaning, is also described by him in terms of a non-violence:

This presentation [of the face of the other, *EE*] is pre-eminently non-violence, for instead of offending my freedom it calls it to responsibility and founds it. As non-violence it nonetheless maintains the plurality of the same and the other. It is peace.¹⁴

The other is thus characterized as both violent and peaceful. Although the interruption of my world by the other can be seen as violent, Levinas also speaks of an eschatological peace that interrupts the war of being. The language of the speech of the other bears the non-violent meaning of the call to responsibility, and at the same time can be taken as a violent interruption.

Three problems need to be mentioned with regard to this characterization of perception and knowledge, as well as its interruption by the other, as violent:

- Not every intentionality, and also not every perception or cognitive statement are necessarily violent. The loving care of a parent for a child, a dialogue between friends, a benevolent effort to understand the other, can all be described as relations between subjects that are not necessarily violent towards the other who is perceived and understood. There is a possible violence in these relationships, but not a necessary violence. One can do justice to the other by understanding her well. This understanding will always highlight some aspects of the other and conceal or miss other sides, but that is not necessarily violent. The inevitable

¹³ Ibid., p. XV (english tr., p. 27); cf. *ibid.*, p. XIII (english tr., p. 25).

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 177–178 (english tr., p. 203).

perspectivity and finitude of every form of knowledge should not be taken as violent, but only as potentially violent.

- If every intentional act implies violence, then violence is omnipresent; but if everything is violent, nothing is violent and the word 'violence' loses its meaning. This is even more relevant, when the pre-original interruption of these acts by the other, are called violent by Levinas. Therefore, the assertion that every perception or cognitive action is violent, becomes meaningless.
- The ultimate origin of all meaning, the call of the other, seems to be both violent and beyond violence—this can only be understood as a contradiction.

II. *Derrida: the Economy of Violence*

In his early text on the work of Levinas, Jacques Derrida characterizes Levinas' view of the reduction by intentionality as a 'violence of light'.¹⁵ This expression is not only an adequate depiction of Levinas' position, it also shows its tensions and ambiguities. For in Derrida's text it refers not just to the dominance of the same over the other, but also to the Platonic metaphor of the sun, the Idea of the Good beyond the beings [*epekeina tes ousias*], that transcends any totality.¹⁶ Every violent light can only be made visible and be thematized from out of the perspective of another light. This logic is inescapable: one cannot use the metaphor of light without already being taken by the language of this metaphor.¹⁷ Levinas' metaphysics, according to Derrida, is an "... *economy*: violence against violence, light against light."¹⁸

This economy demonstrates the inevitability of Levinasian violence. Violence can only be described and analyzed by a discourse that carries out the same violence itself. The economy of the violence of light also sheds light on the profound ambiguity of Levinas' philosophy: despite their asymmetrical relation, the Self and the Other presuppose each other, without a possible reconciliation on a higher level. Levinas was well aware

¹⁵ J. Derrida, 'Violence et métaphysique', in: *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), pp. 117–228, here pp. 125–137; trans by A. Bass as *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 84–92.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 126–128 (english tr., pp. 85–86).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 137 (english tr., p. 92).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 173 (english tr., p. 117).

of this ambiguity, which is shown, e.g., in his description of the relation between Self and Other as a relation of two absolutes.¹⁹

Derrida also shows the multi-interpretability of violence. He does so by defending Husserl's transcendental violence and Heidegger's ontological violence against Levinas' critique. I will only highlight a few aspects of this defence. The primacy of theory and objectivity in Husserl's phenomenology is criticized by Levinas, but defended by Derrida as an inevitable and necessary feature of philosophy as such.²⁰ At the same time this primacy has been put in perspective by Husserl himself, in the notion of horizon. The horizon accompanies every phenomenon but can never be completely objectified itself, since it is the source of every object as such. There is an infinity in every horizon that opens philosophical discourse for an irreducible otherness:

That the infinity of the Husserlian horizon has the form of an indefinite opening, and that it offers itself without any possible end to the negativity of constitution (of the work of objectification)—does this not certainly keep it from all totalization, from the illusion of the immediate presence of a plenitudinous infinity in which the other suddenly becomes unfindable?²¹

This leads to a more positive account of intentionality:

Is not intentionality respect itself? The eternal irreducibility of the other to the same, but of the other *appearing as* other for the same? For without this phenomenon of the other as other no respect would be possible. The phenomenon of respect supposes the respect of phenomenality. And ethics, phenomenology. In this sense, phenomenology is respect itself.²²

In line with this view of intentionality, Derrida interprets Husserl's analysis of the *alter ego* in the famous and notorious Fifth Cartesian Meditation as a respect of otherness and as an effort to understand the otherness of the other without reducing her to the self: "...to gain access to the egoity of the alter ego as if to its alterity itself is the most peaceful gesture

¹⁹ E. Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, op. cit., p. 6 (english tr., p. 36); in a later phase in his article Derrida problematizes this ambiguity by speaking of an economy of symmetry and asymmetry, whereas Levinas prefers the primacy of asymmetry; cf. J. Derrida, 'Violence et métaphysique', art. cit., pp. 184–185 (english tr., pp. 125–126).

²⁰ J. Derrida, 'Violence et métaphysique', art. cit., pp. 178–180 (english tr., pp. 121–122).

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 177 (english tr., pp. 120–121). This is a remarkable passage, because usually Derrida is much more critical of the notion of horizon, seeing it, in line with Levinas, as a totalizing limit rather than as a transcendental openness.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 178 (english tr., p. 121), translation slightly changed.

possible.”²³ The peacefulness of this act, however, can only be thought as part of an economy of violence:

For this transcendental origin, as the irreducible violence of the relation to the other, is at the same time nonviolence, since it opens the relation to the other. It is an *economy*. And it is this economy which, by this opening, will permit access to the other to be determined, in ethical freedom, as moral violence or nonviolence.²⁴

In sum, not only the violence of the interruption of the same by the other is ambiguous, in the sense that it can be articulated as non-violent. Also the transcendental violence of Husserlian intentionality can be interpreted, according to Derrida, as non-violent and peaceful. Both the same and the other, the economy of the self in phenomenological intentionality and the withdrawal of the face of the other, are transcendental, violent and non-violent. When Levinas states that the transcendental violence of phenomenology has to be questioned by a metaphysical eschatology, Derrida answers that this questioning can only take place within philosophy. More precisely: this question cannot be articulated without philosophy, but it cannot be controlled by philosophy as well, it also escapes philosophy.

What is the origin of the question about transcendental archi-factuality as violence? Upon what basis does one ask questions about finitude as violence? [...] Of course, one cannot *answer* these questions [...] except by undertaking a new discourse which once more will seek to justify transcendental phenomenology. But the naked opening of the question, its silent opening, escapes phenomenology, as the origin and end of phenomenology's logos. [...] This is the opening of a question, in the inversion of transcendental dissymmetry, put to philosophy as logos, finitude, history, violence: an interpellation of the Greek by the non-Greek at the heart of a silence, an ultralogical effect of speech, a question which can be stated only by being forgotten in the language of the Greeks; and a question which can be stated, as forgotten, only in the language of the Greeks.²⁵

Levinas' critique of the transcendental violence of philosophical reflection, therefore, can only be articulated within this reflection. The questioning of philosophy itself can only take place within philosophy, which is both questioning and questioned, at the same time. This is what Derrida refers to as “the community of the question.”²⁶

²³ Ibid., pp. 187–188 (english tr., p. 128).

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 188–189 (english tr., pp. 128–129).

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 195–196 (english tr., p. 133).

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 117–119 and 192–196 (english tr., pp. 79–81 and 131–133).

Derrida gives a comparable defense of Heidegger against Levinas' criticism: "Not only is the thought of Being not ethical violence, but it seems that no ethics—in Levinas's sense—can be opened without it."²⁷ I leave this part of 'Violence and Metaphysics' aside and limit this discussion of Derrida's text to his ideas on transcendental violence.

In short, Derrida states (1) that there is a transcendental violence of light, that makes all representation and appearance a reduction to the same; but also (2) that every critique of this violence is in itself violent as well, (3) that this critique also presupposes the violence of light that it seeks to criticize, and finally (4) that this violence is at the same time an openness towards peace and ethics. Derrida underlines that he does not give a critique of Levinas' thought, but shows the questions and problems that arise within this thought.²⁸ All together, this is a problematizing of his idea of transcendental violence that makes this notion even more complicated.

The same complications can be found in *Of Grammatology*, where Derrida gives a deconstructive reading of a chapter of Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques*, with the famous passage on the 'language lesson', in which Lévi-Strauss states that violence is a main feature of written language.²⁹ In his interpretation and commentary Derrida reveals a more original violence that can be found in any discourse. Discourse and language are in themselves violent. Derrida discerns three levels of violence:

- The original violence of naming. By giving a name language inscribes a singular event or thing in a general system that can only exist due to the repeatability of its elements, thereby destroying the singular. This is the 'archi-violence' of 'archi-writing'.
- The first or original violence is concealed and denied by a second violence that tries to construe and remain a systematic order. This is the violence of law that allows one thing but forbids another.
- The third violence consists of a trespassing of the law. This is violence in the usual meaning of the word. According to Derrida it can only be understood in relation to the two more profound levels of violence.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 202 (english tr., p. 137); cf. ibid., p. 208 (english tr., p. 141): "Just as he implicitly had to appeal to phenomenological self-evidences against phenomenology, Levinas must ceaselessly suppose and practice the thought of precomprehension of Being in his discourse, even when he directs it against 'ontology'."

²⁸ Ibid., p. 161 (english tr., p. 109).

²⁹ C. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (Paris: Plon, 1955), pp. 337–349.

Unlike the first two forms of violence it is not inevitable but can eventually take place. But its possibility is structural and unavoidable.³⁰

A complete and definitive termination of all violence is impossible. An annihilation of the third order violence can only be reached by a perfect law system that would vanish all the traces of archi-violence and establish a complete equalization of all differences—which would be the ultimate violence of a totalitarian system. Pure non-violence, in a word, is the ultimate violence. In Derrida's view, this unavoidable trespassing and violence is one of the quasi-transcendental conditions of (im)possibility of ethics and morality as such. Violence thus has become inevitable. There can only be an economy of violence.

III. *Violence and Finitude*

Prima facie it seems that violence in Derrida's point of view has even deeper transcendental roots than in Levinas' approach. Despite all the ambiguity in his thought, Levinas holds on to the idea of a non-violent speech of the other that is the call to responsibility. The transcendental violence of the light of intentionality that enlightens my world finds after all its opposite in the call of the other who is at the same time violent and non-violent. It seems that such an opposition cannot be found in Derrida. In short: Levinas' metaphysics is a philosophy of difference that nevertheless testifies to one origin that has to be understood as non-violent; Derrida's work shows a more consequent philosophy of difference that locates violence on a quasi-transcendental level of difference, without any place for pure non-violence.

Consequently, Derrida seems to have overcome the third problem of Levinas' approach of the concept of violence: the contradiction of the other being violent and non-violent at the same time. There seems to be no ideal of non-violence to be found in Derrida's thought.

But perhaps things are more complicated. For the second problem that appeared as a result of Levinas' view, is even deepened in Derrida. Since violence is omnipresent and, if we can say so, 'even more omnipresent', the term 'violence' looses its meaning. But don't we need some notion of 'non-violence' in order to understand what 'violence' means? Such a

³⁰ J. Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), pp. 164–165; trans. by G. C. Spivak as *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997 [1976]), p. 112.

notion, however, can not be found in 'Violence and Metaphysics'. But it can, in a way, be found in the later work of Derrida, where he seems to move in the direction of Levinas.

From the early 1980s on, Derrida writes more and more on the ideas of justice, democracy and the gift. These are strictly formal ideas and ideals that always remain to come, *à venir*.³¹ They should not be understood as a future present, but as a coming to be that will never really be. There is no definition possible of these ideals, because such a definition would have to be immune for the transcendental archi-violence of naming. The ultimate and absolute justice would be a pure combination of generality and singularity without any tension. This justice-to-come can be taken as the opposite of original transcendental violence. Both can never be captured in philosophical concepts, but create the tension that keeps the metaphysical *philosophia perennis* going.³² Only thanks to this absolute and unreachable idea of non-violence it makes sense to speak of a transcendental violence that is presupposed by everything that appears. This means that there is a Derridean notion of absolute non-violence after all, which brings him closer to Levinas.

Another difference between Levinas and Derrida comes to the fore in Derrida's defense of Husserl and Heidegger. The transcendental violence of the light of Husserlian intentionality appeared to be labeled as "the most peaceful gesture possible".³³ Here we find the first problem that was found in Levinas' ideas on violence: not every intentionality seems to be violent. In Derrida's elaboration of this benevolent approach of the other, however, this peaceful non-violence appears to be rooted in an original violence after all. In other words, also in Derrida violence and non-violence go together in a problematic way. Derrida, therefore, has to face the same problems as Levinas, pertaining to his ideas on transcendental violence.

³¹ See, e.g., J. Derrida, *D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1983); idem, *Spectres de Marx. L'État de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Galilée, 1993); idem, *Force de loi* (Paris: Galilée, 1994); *Donner la mort* (Paris: Galilée, 1999).

³² Cf. E. Evink, 'Jacques Derrida and the Faith in Philosophy', in: *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* XLII/3 (2004), 313–331. In terms of Rodolphe Gasché, and also of Derrida himself, these 'concepts' can be called quasi-concepts, quasi-transcendentals or infrastructures, that make conceptualization possible but cannot be called concepts themselves; see R. Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 274, 295, 316–318; idem, *Inventions of Difference. On Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 4–7, 22–57; cf. G. Bennington, 'Derridabase', in: G. Bennington, & J. Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), pp. 248–263.

³³ Derrida, 'Violence et métaphysique', art. cit., p. 188 (english tr., p. 128).

Let us take a closer look to what exactly makes the light of intentionality so profoundly violent in the eyes of Levinas and Derrida. In Levinas the violence of light consists in a dominance of the other by the same in which the otherness of the other is suppressed and excluded. In Derrida it is the singularity of the event that is restrained by the generality of language, while this generality itself can never attain purity. In both cases the alterity of the singular is reduced and excluded by a general denominator. In every understanding of the singular other, other choices were possible, which are denied. Finitude and contextuality, in other words, lead to choices of which no final account can be given. In both Levinas and the later Derrida non-violence seems to be the absolute and ideal situation in which there would be no tension anymore between the general and the singular, between the same and the other. 'Violence' is the name that is given here to the finitude of all actions, choices and articulations, because they, as such, fall short of an absolute metaphysical ideal of purity and wholeness. Although this ideal of a metaphysical purity cannot be found in Derrida's work, it is part of the metaphysical intentionality and tradition that are deconstructed by his work from within—by a deconstruction that can only function within this metaphysical project and therefore has to presuppose it.

But are finitude and contextuality enough to explain and understand violence? Does it make sense to label the inevitable choices and interpretations that we make every second, as violent? In my view this is the core of the three problems that were mentioned above and that haunt the work of both Levinas and Derrida: if every intentional act implies violence, then no distinction can be made between violence and non-violence, and the whole concept loses its meaning. Non-violence has changed into an impossible, absolute, metaphysical ideal that can never be reached, and that functions as a hidden strictly formal norm that structures the systematical movement of differences.

Where does this ideal of an absolute and non-reductive norm come from? It is a presupposition of the metaphysical tradition that has always been looking for a complete and absolute understanding of reality. According to Derrida, this metaphysical desire for the absolute is even inherent in language, because it is presupposed in the moment of deferral in movement of *différance*. *Différance* is the movement of both differing and deferring: being other and postponement. Since the definitive meaning of a word can never be determined, the ultimate meaning is always delayed. In fact Derrida, at least in his later work, seems to presuppose that there is a tension between every linguistic utterance and

its ultimate meaning—a presupposition that lacks argumentation and is, moreover, redundant.

Only on the basis of this presupposition can finitude and contextuality be seen as inherently violent. If we abandon this presupposition of a striving towards absolute purity and transparency, then finiteness and perspectivity do not appear to be inherently violent at all. They always involve the possibility of being or becoming violent, but violence is not their necessary feature.

IV. *The Circle Between the Transcendental and the Empirical*

Whereas *différance* can be taken as a neutral term, 'violence' has more of a moral value that is in opposition with 'non-violence'. Its meaning can only be understood in accordance with its usage in everyday language or scientific language. The transcendental use of the term 'violence' is dependent on its use on an empirical level.

Here we can find a parallel with Heideggerian terminology. In *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger forges many new concepts by changing their empirical or ontic meaning into a transcendental or ontological meaning. This is the case in terms like 'Understanding', 'Being-guilty' and 'Care' (*Verstehen*, *Schuldigsein*, *Sorge*) and many more. Derrida problematizes these conceptualizations in *Apories*, where he focuses on Heidegger's analysis of our relation to death and finitude. Heidegger tries to make a clear distinction between empirical or ontic approaches of mortality on the one hand and his transcendental or ontological way of thinking on the other hand: "The existential analysis is methodically prior to the questions of a biology, psychology, theodicy, and the theology of death."³⁴ The empirical, scientific and theological discourses on death and mortality are all made on the level of objective presence (*vorhanden*), on an ontic level. They presuppose a formal and neutral ontological analysis of Dasein and its Being-to-Death (*Sein-zum-Tode*).

In *Apories* Derrida gives a deconstructive reading of Heidegger's effort to make clear distinctions in his phenomenological analysis of mortality. One of these clear distinctions is found in the division he makes between the fundamental ontology (*Fundamentalontologie*) of Dasein

³⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1986 [1927]), p. 248; trans. by Joan Stambaugh as *Being and Time* (Albany: SUNY, 1996), p. 230.

and other theoretical approaches.³⁵ Derrida refers to a historiographical and anthropological tradition to which Heidegger can be said to belong and he also states that Heidegger's division between an authentic and inauthentic Being-to-Death is not as neutral as Heidegger claims it is. Heidegger's ontological investigation of mortality cannot be neutral with regard to moral and empirical opinions of death and mortality. His transcendental method can never avoid influences of ideas and views on an empirical level.

This is just an example of Derrida's problematization of the supposed clear distinction between the transcendental and the empirical. The transcendental becomes quasi-transcendental, because it always in a way presupposes the empirical. In other words, Derrida deconstructs the distinction between the transcendental and the empirical.

Similar remarks can be made with regard to the notion of transcendental violence. The point of view that intentionality and the existential characteristics of Dasein, as transcendental conditions of possibility, are violent, because of the excluding effect of their perspectivity—this point of view inevitably has connotations of a moral criticism of violence on an empirical level. If it did not have had these connotations, Derrida probably would not have used this term, for it is this moral undertone of 'violence' that gives Derrida's expression its rhetorical force. We can see here a quasi-transcendental circle of the transcendental and the empirical at work in Derrida's own text.

The moral connotations, however, only make sense if violence can be distinguished from what is not violent. But if on a transcendental level every intentionality and every characterization can be said to be violent, then this distinction disappears and, consequently, the meaning of the word 'violence' is lost. This would mean the end of any phenomenology of violence, the end even of any possible theoretical or moral analysis of violence. This contradiction can only be avoided if it will be acknowledged that not all intentionality is violent. Finitude and perspectivity are not violent in themselves.

Does this mean that Derrida's idea of transcendental violence does not make sense and that we should leave it aside? Not at all. The transcendental is not necessarily violent, but that does not mean it cannot be violent. An important feature of Derrida's idea of the quasi-transcendental is

³⁵ Derrida, *Apories* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), pp. 83–112; trans. by Thomas Dutoit as *Aporias* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 43–62.

that conditions of possibility are always finite and have a perspective of their own. It is a structural characteristic of finiteness and contextuality that the inevitable exclusion, suppression or sublimation of otherness can appear to be unjustifiable and violent. Therefore transcendental conditions of possibility always might already be or become violent.

This quasi-transcendental violence is located by Derrida in language. In his view naming is the original violence. One can interpret language and naming in two ways: in a narrow and literal sense as the reference to things, circumstances and matters of fact by words; or in a broader sense as what Derrida often describes with 'text': the moment of inscribing a phenomenon in a context. For the stakes of my argument this does not make much difference. In my conclusions, I only focus on the narrow meaning, by looking for the transcendental violence that might occur in the definition of violence.

What exactly can we conclude from our discussion of Derrida's ideas of quasi-transcendental violence? To start with, Derrida is completely right when he demonstrates how intentions and definitions are inscribed in networks of differential references. Definitions are never completely fixed, they remain open for amelioration, as well as for deterioration. The forces of distinction, differentiation, appropriation and exclusion can take the shape of violence, and are transcendental conditions of the possibility of violence.

However, Derrida's supposition that these forces always operate within systems that tend towards purity, cannot be maintained. Finitude must not necessarily be understood in a metaphysical fashion as a shortcoming with regard to the infinite or the absolute. Therefore I prefer terms like 'difference' or 'force' to refer to the differential work of references, because they tend to be more neutral than 'violence'. Violence is made possible by these transcendental forces of difference and inscription, these forces can even themselves turn out to be violent, but they cannot as such be taken as necessarily violent.

Of course this also goes for the definition of violence. Just as the definitions of war, peace, and so on, this definition is not in itself violent, but can appear to become violent. There is no purely non-violent distinction between violence and non-violence. The potential violence of such distinctions can be easily illustrated with, e.g., the 'liberation' of Iraq by the US Army that "brings peace and democracy", or by the Russian "peace troops" in the Georgian province of North-Ossetia.

There are many other distinctions to be made within the concept of violence, such as natural and interpersonal violence, justified and unjustified

violence, real and virtual violence, and so on. These distinctions are only possible and meaningful if they are not taken as necessarily violent in themselves, i.e., if it makes sense to speak of violence and non-violence. Reflection on these distinctions has to be endlessly repeated, especially because violence may be at stake directly within the definitions and descriptions of violence.