

# **Philosophy and Its Other-Violence: A Survey of Philosophical Repression From Plato to Girard**

**Tobin Siebers**

**Department of English Language and Literature  
University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor MI 48109  
tobin@umich.edu**

What does it mean to say that the other of philosophy is violence? First, it means that violence plays a role in the naming of philosophy. We are accustomed today to thinking about the founding of disciplines in terms of what they must exclude. Structures of exclusion, the argument goes, are the defining practices for the creation of disciplinary formations. The identity between a discipline and its other is cemented by the act of excluding the other from the scene of representation. Actually, "exclusion" is not the right word because the other term is not formally excluded; it remains a passive force in the definition of the more active term. Perhaps, for this reason, "repression" is a better word if we consider the dynamic sense that Freud gave to it.

Thus, to name philosophy, to found philosophy, something must be designated as the other. If the other of philosophy is violence, philosophy must represent (and repress) violence in the name of philosophy. I want to suggest, however, that philosophy represents (and represses) violence in a particular way. It represents violence as an idea rather than as a phenomenon. The idea of violence appears in many guises in philosophy-and I will be taking up some of them in a moment-so many guises in fact that one is reduced to an analysis of the "metaphorics of violence" when one approaches the subject of violence and philosophy. Indeed, some recent philosophizing has gone so far as to designate this problem as a cure, arguing that violence is at base metaphorical, epistemological, ideational, and so forth. The phenomenon of violence, however, remains virtually untouched as a philosophical subject. There is no phenomenology of violence in philosophy. Some might object that this is more properly speaking a subject for political science, not philosophy. But I would argue that this is another case of repressing violence in the name of philosophy. Consequently, the question guiding this survey is: Can philosophy take violence as an object of study and still know itself?

Before looking at some of the guises of violence in philosophy, I need to make clear why I

am investigating this topic with a particular beginning and end in mind, that is, beginning with Plato and concluding with René Girard. Girard is not a philosopher, it seems, which means only that it is difficult to be serious about the nature of violence and retain the title of philosopher. But Girard is in some manner a phenomenologist of violence. He is a phenomenologist of violence because he wants to assert, first and foremost, that violence is an object of representation. Violence is what representation takes as its object, and what representation does to violence is to re-present it in the form of different ideas. Most obvious are the social ideas that exist to repress, to reorient, and to contain the nature of violence: these are evident in political orders, religious systems, and aesthetic forms. What is most daring about Girard's thought, however-and this is what makes it both useful and pertinent to philosophy-is his sense that second-order discourses, such as philosophy, also participate in the translation of violence into ideas. According to Girard, cultural formations-and discourses about them-re-present violence by engaging in a process of substitution in which other names stand in for violence and redirect its effects. He refers to this process of substitution, of representation, as a sacrificial order because it scapegoats one term in the name of the desire to escape from the ultimate term, violence. No doubt, I add quickly, this process of representing violence as something else has an ethical dimension insofar as it attempts to contain violence. But because it also sacrifices this something else in the place of violence, it possesses what we might be tempted to call an unethical dimension as well. Whatever chooses to re-present violence, rather than to reveal it, colludes with violence.

## 2

Philosophy as a discourse with a certain fondness for knowledge, then, is as implicated in this repression of violence as are the orders of knowledge that it loves. The rigorous devotion to the idea, which is philosophy, is part and parcel of a containment program whose object is violence and whose name is, to use the most general term, "culture." That this culture is sacrificial is Girard's fundamental insight as well as the source of our ultimate discontent.

Notice, as I now turn to my survey of philosophers, that I will be treating some philosophers who may not be recognizable as philosophers at all. I want to emphasize thinkers for whom the representation of violence is the most transparent, and since the title of philosopher-or so my thesis argues-shares the stage only at its peril with the phenomenon of violence, I have been forced to stretch the designation. For among more recognizable philosophers the topic of violence is so contained as to be virtually nonexistent.

Idealism begins properly speaking with Plato, and that long line of idealists called philosophers descends from him. Plato writes the originary scene of philosophy's love of ideas, but it is rarely noted that he also creates the originary scene of philosophy's repression of violence. The theory of ideas is in truth an asceticism of ideas, and what Plato

wishes to master is violence. This is evident, first of all, in the fact that philosophy and political science share the same stage. The *Republic* sketches a theory of mimesis that begins the long association between truth and solidarity so important to political evolution. On the one hand, Plato defines truth according to a view of mimesis in which all divergences from or versions of truth descend from a single ideal, so that one can calibrate the degrading of forms with respect to the ideal. The closer a form is to the ideal, the more true and less corrupt it is. In epistemology, this theory of ideas appears harmless enough. Indeed, the theory of ideas is fascinating. Undergraduates love to debate about Plato's ideal table, and they easily understand how the theory of ideas works, despite all the paradoxes involved in it. Plato's theory of ideas fascinates because Platonism captures our need to be saved from violence through the fascination by ideas. It defines the desire to turn ourselves away from things human toward transcendence. Plato and the most ordinary undergraduate share the desire to become more godlike, as do we all.

In the political sphere, on the other hand, the theory of ideas looks very different. When we translate to the realm of the city Plato's desire to reduce conflict between competing forms by describing them as descending from a common idea, it grows clear that he is concerned with competition among human beings, and that the theory of ideas is a means of representing the violence of the city as a problem about ideas. Consequently, Plato idealizes everything, including violence. Violence is rational in Plato. It has an end and object in view. In a remarkable passage in book two, Plato makes the transition from his theory of ideas to his notion of the ideal republic. He argues that warfare arises because individuals compete for possessions and take over other people's concerns, and he proposes a solution by establishing the same type of hierarchical arrangement found in the realm of ideas in the realm of politics. In the perfect state, "one man could not do more than one job or profession well" (374b). Each individual represents a type of character, a character that dictates his or her talents, activities, and purpose. As long as individuals obey their nature and do not diverge from it, harmony will continue to exist in the city.

### 3

Plato fails to account for the irrational nature of violence, then, although he does attempt to impose a cure for it. Violence grows according to a mimetic pattern in which individuals want to possess objects not because they desire them but because they are imitating other people around them. The teleology of desire does not lead to objects in the world, although it appears to do so. The teleology of desire is more desire, and it relies on a distinctly interpersonal dimension of human existence. Mimetic desire is both violent and necessary with regard to the city. The desire to repeat the actions of others makes communal consensus possible; the conflicts inevitable in such imitations bring about social violence. Plato addresses both of these problems in his idealization of violence. First, he defines desire as a desire for objects. Second, he apportions objects according to distinct patterns in which individuals will only compete for objects appropriate to their characters. Like

individual ideas, each type of citizen in the community is cordoned off in a separate realm, and within each realm, a hierarchy establishes which individual represents the highest instance of that realm's truth. The Platonic model of government looks like an ancient *quadrillage*—a quarantine—to fight the plague. It superimposes a grid over the city, inhibiting travel and transactions between separate zones, and within each zone a similar system maintains order. But Plato does not admit that the plague is violence. His theory of ideas needs, first and foremost, to repress the phenomenon of violence and to translate what cannot be repressed into an idealized form. The *Republic* takes place on the outskirts of Athens because ultimately Plato's city is only an idea of a city.

Sadism may be thought of as the philosophical idea most cognizant of violence. And yet Sade also idealizes violence, and in a manner reminiscent of Plato. Perhaps the best way to recognize the idealism of violence in Sade is to remember that he is involved in a philosophical dispute. In recent years, thanks to Lacan, much has been made of the fact that Sade creates a philosophical allegory in his work to attack Enlightenment philosophy. In the case of Kant especially, critics are delighted to show how much Kant is like Sade. But if Kant is like Sade, it means that Sade is like Kant. Sade does not diverge ultimately from Enlightenment philosophy because his definition of sex is about proving ideas and aspiring to utopia. First, even though he wants to prove that his idea of human nature is superior to that of his philosophical opponents, he does not diverge from the philosophical language of his times, and he confirms its traditional opposition and conclusions. Sade uses the discourse of nature to justify his arguments, privileges liberty above all else, uses nascent ideas of human rights to describe the individual's ownership of his or her own body, and attacks religious belief as the source of many problems. Second, he wishes to design a utopian community. As horrible as Sade's bedroom may seem to us on the outside, to those on the inside, it defines a domain of ideal consensus and cooperation achieved through the universal pursuit of pleasure and through education, that is, through the imposition of ideas. The right ideas about sex bring happiness and harmony. The more natural the idea, the more its chance of success. The logic of Sadean philosophy critiques few Enlightenment principles, except on the basis of Enlightenment principles. Indeed, the erotic mores of our own day combine most obviously Sade's interest in sex and Enlightenment moral pedagogy: we are required to respect individual ends to the point of feeling a moral responsibility to help people who take pleasure in pain. Our sense of self-sacrifice to this categorical imperative is so great that we never question whether we might be harming ourselves by agreeing to hurt people who like to be hurt.

I do not mean to underplay either the originality or the irony of Sade. *Philosophy in the Bedroom* marks a divergence from philosophy as usual in many ways. First and foremost is the inclusion of sex as a philosophical subject. But Sadean sex ends by reinforcing philosophy as usual. In the same way that Plato's theory of ideas puts us off the scent of

violence, Sade's theory of sex represses the notion of violence. There is a lot of violence in Sade, but we read it as sex. There where cruelty is right before our eyes, we fail to recognize it. Sadism is not the pleasure in violence. It is the concealment of violence in sex, and sex remains a rational order for Sade. How else do we explain the ability of Sade's libertines to fuck and philosophize at the same time? The consequence is a philosophy of the bedroom in which violence is submitted to the idealism of sex. Indeed, Sadean sex is a challenge to outphilosophize violence in order to produce an ideal form of violence. If there has to be violence and cruelty, Sade seems to say, we might as well enjoy them. There has yet to be a reading of Sade that exposes the traditional nature of his philosophy with regard to violence.

Hegel's dialectic of the master and slave finally makes explicit the interpersonal violence troubling Enlightenment philosophy, taking a decisive step in the history of philosophical conceptions of violence.<sup>[1]</sup> Most explicitly, he explains that cause and effect occur in an anthropological context in which individuals struggle for recognition and to dominate others. Each individual is potentially another cause interfering with the schema of cause and effect in which I direct my actions toward a proposed end. By defining desire as the desire for recognition, Hegel also succeeds in conceiving of violence in terms of a human conflict rather than epistemological incommensurability.<sup>[2]</sup> His idea of violence is by far more raw than anyone before him, including Sade, and it is no accident that Girard has been influenced by him.

There is, however, a latent idealism in Hegel's description of violence, and it lies in its relation to Being. According to Hegel, human beings are communal beings, first and foremost, but they discover their essence only by achieving freedom from their distinctive nature as communal beings. In a move reminiscent of Sade's, Hegel argues that individuals rise to the level of Being-for-self only by denying their communal nature in an act of violence against other human beings. By defining violence as the destruction of the social realm by social beings, Hegel shows both his romantic heritage and the fundamental insight of romanticism, namely that violence is only and always a form of human conflict. Nevertheless, his desire to trace the purely logical development of Being-for-itself transforms violence into a logical device, an idealism, serving his definition of Being. Indeed, violence is the primary educator of Being-for-itself: in the life and death struggle of violence, the self discovers a violence (the violence of the other) that escapes its violence and that threatens its entire existence, thus recognizing the reality of other individuals. Through violence, the self attains a universal point of view in which the dynamic of self and other may be conceptualized.

However, the problem is that Hegel's definition of violence is not compatible with his theory of desire. If desire is the desire for recognition, the self endangers its desire by acting to destroy others by whom it needs to be recognized. One cannot be recognized by a corpse. This contradiction points to the irrational nature of violence, despite Hegel's efforts to give

it a logical role in the emergence of Being. It also seems to dispute that violence might serve education. Hegel never reconciles the desire for recognition and the violent impulse to destroy other people. He simply refers to this violence as evil but as an evil needed to ensure the freedom of Beings-for-itself. In short, Hegel puts violence, despite its irrationality, in service of the idea of Being, and it becomes impossible in his philosophy to understand it outside this orbit.

## 5

It may help to turn, for the penultimate philosopher in my survey, to Jacques Lacan because Hegel's idealization of violence leaves its mark on the new psychoanalytic theory of aggressivity.<sup>[3]</sup> Lacan has the opportunity to create a true phenomenology of violence. He seems eager at points to emphasize the interpersonal nature of violence, and his idea of the symbolic, in which the circulation of signifiers determines subjectivity, seems to provide him with a model for describing how violence exceeds the grasp of any one individual or state of Being. It turns out, however, that aggressivity does not follow the laws of grammar, at least with regard to interpersonal relations. Aggressivity for Lacan arises as an effect of self-image. It does not exist between individuals; rather, other individuals provide a mirror-image by which we play out our own self-aggressivity. For Lacan, interpersonal aggressivity is first and foremost self-aggressivity. Indeed, the theory of self-aggressivity designs a new autonomy of the self, one more powerful than Kant's. First, self-aggressivity is a new form of autonomy because it is strictly a cognitive development. The mirror stage appears at a precise period in mental development, revealing violence to be a problem of individual cognition: between six and eight months, the child recognizes different versions of selfhood and has to think through them. Second, self-aggressivity is a form of autonomy because aggressive behavior toward others is only a symptom of an essential self-aggression defining our individual formation. Never does Lacan view self-aggression as a reflection of interpersonal violence, even though the Freudian theory of introjection could easily permit it. Insofar as Lacan accepts Hegel's definition of desire as the desire for recognition, he remains both an ego psychologist and an idealist of violence, and he fails to reconcile this definition of desire with the autonomy of self-aggressivity. In the end, Lacan contains violence within a metaphorical conception of Being.

In the early *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard accepts many of the basic ideas of Hegelian desire, and he tends to define violence in terms of competition for Being. According to this schema, the model is defined as the individual whose Being we try to imitate. The model of desire appears to possess a surplus of Being, and this abundance spurs individuals to desire the model, to imitate him or her, and to abandon the sense of the originality of their own desires. Girard defines desire as the desire to be the Other. The self-hatred of desiring subjects as well as their hatred of the model nevertheless present Girard with the same contradiction discovered by Hegel. One cannot be what one has killed.<sup>[4]</sup> Consequently, Girard introduces a variation on Hegelian mediation. He makes the case that

internal mediation, which is imitation of desire among human beings, can be organized by external mediation, which is imitation of the nonhuman desire of God. The immortality of Christ introduces a distance that permits the violence of desire to cool, and once this religious hierarchy establishes itself, political forms of hierarchy also become possible. In brief, violence is contained by another form of idealism, one reminiscent of Platonic idealism, in which a hierarchy arranges versions of imitative behavior.

In his later work, however, Girard takes a more phenomenological approach to violence, and the vocabulary of Being drops out of his theory. Mimesis itself adjusts violence to different intensities. Imitation is a function of desire insofar as it occurs between individuals, and these individuals are compelled to repeat other people's gestures. But desire ceases to be metaphysical. Girard begins to seek authority in ethological models of animal mimicry and traces an evolution of representational forms spanning from simple animal mimicry and dominance patterns to kinship relations, ritual, and political forms. It is at this point that his fundamental insight concerning representation and violence finds its most powerful articulation: higher forms of representation repeat the repetitive cycles of violence as a means of containing violence. But the success and failure of this containment depends on the phenomenon of violence itself.

## 6

Consequently, one finds in Girard a most unusual and, I think, fruitful attempt to capture the nature of violence. Violence, according to Girard, becomes an entity—a phenomenon—for human beings, and he explains that it is important to describe it as such:

The *mimetic* attributes of violence are extraordinary—sometimes direct and positive, at other times indirect and negative. The more men strive to curb their violent impulses, the more these impulses seem to prosper. . . . Violence is like a raging fire that feeds on the very objects intended to smother its flames. The metaphor of fire could well give way to metaphors of tempest, flood, and earthquake. . . . In acknowledging that fact, however, we do not mean to endorse the theory that sees in the sacred a simple transformation of natural phenomena. . . . Tempests, forest fires, and plagues, among other phenomena, may be classified as sacred. Far outranking these, however, though in a far less obvious manner, stands human violence—violence seen as something exterior to man and henceforth as part of all the other outside forces that threaten mankind. Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred. We have yet to learn how man succeeds in positing his own violence as an independent being. (*Violence and the Sacred* 31)

It is important to note that this apparent personification of violence is not merely another version of Hegelian Being. By giving violence its due, Girard makes the point that it exists between individuals, as a function of mimesis, rather than being a property of metaphysical Being. This is most clear in his late treatment of subjectivity and Being. Almost concurrent

with the attempt to describe the phenomenology of violence, Girard simply abandons talk about Being. Being as such becomes impossible to discuss as an individual phenomenon. There is no autonomous self in Girardian theory. Individuality—perhaps better called “interdividuality” [5]— is a function of imitative patterns existing in the social realm, and individual autonomy is better recognized as a political artifact created by particular societies. As such it has many political uses. But it has no existence apart from these political uses. In brief, Girard sketches the most radical theory of the decentered, nonessentialistic self on the current scene. For him, human desire is only relatively distinct from animal desire. There is no Freudian unconscious with its lingering autonomy. The unconscious is fully social. Self-aggressivity, for Girard, is a by-product of interpersonal violence. Alienation is not a function of Being. It is a political creation brought about by the violent exclusion of individuals and their internalization of exclusionary language.

If Girard begins to sound at this point more like a political scientist, psychologist, anthropologist, or sociologist than a philosopher, it is because philosophy, not Girard, has difficulties with the problem of violence. I began by asking whether philosophy can take violence as an object of study and still know itself. The answer given by many postmodern philosophers—Seyla Benhabib, Cornelius Castoriadis, Nancy Fraser, Richard Rorty, and Charles Taylor, to name but a few—as they turn from traditional areas of philosophical inquiry to issues of solidarity, democracy, power, ideology, political identity, and human rights, appears to be a resounding “No.” Better that philosophy forget itself, they seem to be saying, and remember violence.

7

## Works Cited

Gans, Eric. *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985.

Girard, René. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. Trans. Y. Freccero. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Trans. Stephen Baum and Michael Metteer. Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1987.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Violence and the Sacred*. Trans. Patrick Gregory. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

Hegel, G. W. F. *The Phenomenology of Mind*. New York: Humanities Press, 1966.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Science of Logic*. New York: Humanities Press, 1969.



Hoffman, Piotr. *Violence in Modern Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1977.

Oughourlian, Jean-Michel. *The Puppet of Desire: The Psychology of Hysteria, Possession, and Hypnosis*. Trans. Eugene Webb. Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1991.

Plato. *The Republic*. Trans. Desmond Lee. New York: Penguin, 1974.

Sade, Marquis de. *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and Other Writings*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1965.

Siebers, Tobin. *The Ethics of Criticism*. Ithaca, Ny.: Cornell University Press, 1988.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Politics and Peace." *Contagion* 3 (1996), forthcoming.

## Notes

[1] For a clear exposition of the role of violence in Hegel, see Hoffman's *Violence in Modern Philosophy*. See my "Politics and Peace," for an exposition of how the relation between self and other affects Kant's political philosophy. ([back](#))

[2] Although let us not forget that Hegel did author the unfortunate notion that the word kills the thing. Despite his emphasis on human conflict, then, he did buttress the tradition that views epistemological violence as a greater sin than physical violence. ([back](#))

[3] I leave out the obvious case of Nietzsche whom I have treated elsewhere (1988). The portrayal of violence in Nietzsche is raw in the Hegelian tradition, but his concept of power has had the paradoxical effect of turning current philosophy away from ideas of cruelty and violence. ([back](#))

[4] Eric Gans (*The End of Culture*, chap. 1) founds his theory of generative anthropology at this juncture in Girard's theory, departing from Girard's idea that the body of the victim is the first sign and making the case that an aborted gesture of appropriation, which simultaneously renounces and refers both to the victim and to the surrounding community, is the first act of representation. Gans's perspective is especially valuable because it permits a description of epistemology as an attempt to contain violence, thereby returning the idealization of violence in philosophical circles to its primal scene. ([back](#))

[5] This is the coinage of Jean-Michel Oughourlian, whose *Puppet of Desire* makes the strongest case from a Girardian point of view for the absence of any individual core self.