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Subjectivity and violence from the perspective of critical realism

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ABSTRACT

This article is dedicated to reflecting on violence from the perspective of the paradigm of critical realism. These considerations lead in an unavoidable way to reflect the nature of the human person in general. The analysis of various concepts on this subject is an important part of this text. Archer's theory is of particular importance here. The subject of consideration is especially her concept of concerns, and above all ultimate concerns. On this basis, I develop my own concept of horizons of reference, which brings me to yet other types of concerns. Following in the footsteps of Martin Heidegger and Paul Tillich, I examine the issue of particular concerns: ontological, eschatological and transcendental. The problem of violence here is narrowed to the phenomenon of aggression, its types and causes. I am writing here about the consequences of deprivation of the above-mentioned concerns.

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Introduction: the goal and the main hypotheses

In this article, I attempt to describe the notion of violence. The main issue addressed here are the reasons for which humans exercise violence. I skip some possible causes mentioned in literature because of lack of space. In particular, I challenge the assumption that violence is part of human nature. I confront this ethical naturalism within the perspective of critical realism and Margaret Archer's concept of human beings. My hypothesis is that a vital factor of violence, although not the only one, is disturbances in horizons of reference. Their characteristics allow me, in turn, to propose a related hypothesis concerning relations between disturbances of individual and collective horizons of reference, and the most essential human concerns and ultimately with their subjectivity. I will be concentrating upon the meaning of a peculiar category of concerns, which I call transcendent, among which one can distinguish those that are ontic and eschatological in character. I also discuss the importance of the contemporary civilizational crisis for the individual and collective horizons of reference and human subjectivity and specifically human concerns. I assume, therefore, an influence of those global processes on contemporary humans' readiness to exercise violence.

In the context of the specific violence experienced by the human person today, I will consider the problem of the mental ability of persons to defend themselves from such

violence. I will also talk about the support the human person receives from society. These dangers will be presented in the category of concerns, and the ontological characterization of the subjectivity will be used to describe the categories of violence affecting the horizons of reference of a contemporary person with their horizons, that is ontic, epistemic and axiological ones. In particular, I will attempt to show how this type of violence affects mental health.

It is difficult to agree with the idea, grounded in certain forms of ethical naturalism and psychoanalysis, that violence is a natural, obvious and essential feature of human nature, and that it is merely muzzled by culture and society. Understanding human violence requires reflection on the essence of a human person – their ontology. According to Margaret Archer, the human person must be understood in terms of their concerns. The same goes for understanding human violence. I, therefore, argue that violence is not inherent because violence is avoidable if humans are able to achieve their concerns. However, human needs, which guide their concerns, are multi-levelled, complex and sophisticated. Therefore, some needs are easy to recognize and others are more basic and subtle. Among the latter are eschatological, ontic and transcendental concerns, which require horizons of reference in order to be satisfied. They are related to the need to understand the meaning of the world and the importance of one's own life. I believe that these needs are elemental to human flourishing. The descriptive secularized, 'liquid', eclectic culture of our time, dictated by 'instrumental reason', causes widespread and severe curtailment and obstruction of concerns. It is an important factor in the perpetration and mass scale of violence in today's world.

Contemporary people experience violence in many ways and in many dimensions. On one hand, we all – to a greater or lesser extent – have the potential to be violent. This violence may involve collective action or we may act alone. It may be directed towards other individuals, nations or races, or towards ourselves. On the other hand, we are all victims of violence, to varying degrees. Violence results from aggression. Yet it takes various forms. Erich Fromm argued that humans are the only beings capable of *malignant aggression*, as he put it. In *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, he claimed:

> I have used the term 'aggression' for defensive, reactive aggression that I have subsumed under 'benign' aggression, but call 'destructiveness' and 'cruelty' the specifically human propensity to destroy and to crave for absolute control ('malignant aggression'). (Fromm 1973, XVI)

A generally accepted understanding of violence is provided by the 'Encyclopaedia Britannica', which defines it as:

> an act of physical force that causes or is intended to cause harm. The damage inflicted by violence may be physical, psychological, or both. Violence may be distinguished from aggression, a more general type of hostile behaviour that may be physical, verbal, or passive in nature … Violence is a relatively common type of human behaviour that occurs throughout the world. (Jacquin 2017)

However, this definition is vague and its logic is not compelling. I cannot understand how violence can be only of a physical character, yet its results can be both physical and mental. I also think that violence can be inflicted by passive inaction (I do not subscribe to the idea that passive damage is associated only with aggression). Therefore, the

definition that I use in this paper is that violence can be both physical and psychological, and both active and passive.

I returned to the Encyclopaedia Britannica to find their definition of *Aggression*, provided by Holzman (2013):

> Humans are perhaps the only species of animal that does not have an internal inhibition against slaughtering other members of the species. It has been theorized that man, like other animals, is motivated by an aggressive drive, which has significant survival value, but lacks internal inhibitions against killing his fellow men. Inhibitions, therefore, must be imposed externally by society.

However, it seems dubious to me to make this comparison between humans and animals because we know that some animals do kill members of their own species. Furthermore, whilst undoubtedly, humans have the ability to feel aggression and to be driven by it, this occurs only in some situations, e.g. when they feel threatened. If a human is being aggressive outside a context of threat or self-defence, they are suffering from some kind of pathology. I do not believe that aggression is a constant feature of a healthy human person, merely prevented from being expressed by social factors. The point of departure for understanding the phenomenon of violence is not the 'social inhibitors' but rather humans' mental condition. Whilst social inhibitors are important and certainly exist, they are required to regulate the actions of healthy humans who find themselves plunged into situations which justify aggression or unhealthy humans on the sociopathic spectrum. The belief that the typical human person has no inner inhibitors against killing their neighbours and needs external, social inhibitors in this matter is simply bizarre. It requires a disbelief in human conscience, empathy and love. Ultimately – it is a disbelief in the tendency for human beings to be naturally inclined towards good. I do not claim that everyone is always inclined in this way or they are to the same extent; yet I argue that most humans, provided that they are not anti-social, have this tendency. What begs for explanation is why humans sometimes fail to follow it. I believe that a symptom of aggression, among others, is a nervous tension that is felt as hostility and is directed against someone or something. Feeling aggression may result in aggressive behaviour – in violence. In a normal situation, not extremely threatening, a human's system of values, their conscience, attraction towards good, empathy and a kind attitude towards the world and people, as well as socialized norms and the fear of social repressions should make it possible to completely control hostility as a driver of violence.

It seems that violence means using force against someone else. From the point of view of a person or persons, the trigger for violence is not as important as whether it was malign or benign aggression. And the same goes for its social effects. It is, however, extremely important if we want to understand the motives for violence and its mechanisms.

I also believe that the real problem is not the aggression as such: it is its possible disproportionality. Every human and every society has the right to protect themselves; the question is whether this protection is proportional to the threat. Similarly, everyone has the right for expansion, for pursuing their goals, needs and interests, for competition. This leads to conflicts. It is impossible to eliminate conflictual elements from human relationships. The question is, whether the harm we are causing for our own reasons is, first, necessary, and second, proportional to our benefits. There is also a certain type of

harm that is justifiable; it occurs in acts of self-defence, that is, when one's (or someone else's) life, or equivalent goods, are threatened.

Violence and conceptions of human being

Ultimately, the key is the dispute about human nature. I quoted the definitions of aggression and violence from a well-known dictionary. Not simply for the sake of critique, but rather to show the existence of a way of thinking, quite common in human sciences, including the social ones, which – to the extent encyclopaedias are normative – is directive. This way of thinking results from a shallow approach to human ontology in which it is assumed that only the empirical level of reality is real. Thus non-observable factors, such as love and empathy are given no ontological weight; it is therefore assumed that they do not exist and have no place in scientific endeavours to understand human behaviour. This shows how important ontological studies are for understanding the phenomenon of violence; specifically, I refer here to the ontology of the human, of society and of culture. I have found the perspective of critical realism to be indispensable in the endeavour to provide such an ontology, as it does not examine its subject as an artefact of language, a creation of individual or collective imagination or a projection of a chosen ideology, theory or common beliefs. Critical realism assumes that its subject of the investigation is something that exists in a real and objective sense (Wielecki 2016, 27–45), although this does not preclude criticism regarding the cognitive abilities of the researcher and of the human in general, in attempts to describe and explain the reality investigated. Morphogenesis and morphostasis, as a general explanatory framework for a research procedure, can be useful here.

Archer, from the standpoint of critical realism, confirms the importance of the human environment in its broad sense. Yet she stresses:

> […] The 'World itself'. To realists, this signifies the whole natural worlds, constituted of nature, material culture, and Social discourse, making for the natural, practical, and discursive orders with which humans ineluctably have to achieve accommodation. (Donati and Archer 2015, 86)

In this threefold differentiated world, a subject, whose main attribute is reflexivity, has to manage. This is the basic human quality that seems unnoticed for sociology. As Archer puts it, human reflexivity, which had been cast out from sociology by Émile Durkheim, disregarded by Karl Marx in his concept of false consciousness and hidden by Max Weber behind his fourfold typology of action (Archer 2010, 4), the reflexivity of the subject, presumably together with the subject as such, have embarrassingly disappeared from sociology. Conversely, the subject of action, according to Archer, is:

> active and reflexive […] someone who has the properties and powers to monitor his or her own life, to mediate structural and cultural properties of society, and thus to contribute to societal reproduction or transformation. (Archer 2011, 94)

The form of the subject's existence is derived from and given direction by their internal conversation:

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> The internal conversation is never suspended, it rarely sleeps, and what it is doing throughout the endless contingent circumstances it encounters is continuously monitoring its concerns. Inwardly, the subject is living a rich unseen life which is evaluative (rather than calculative,

as is the case of '*Modernity's Man*') and which is meditative (rather than appropriative, as is the lot of *Society's Being*). What this subject is doing, is conducting an endless assessment of whether what it once devoted itself to as its ultimate concern(s) are still worthy of this devotion, and whether the price which was once paid for subordinating and accommodating other concerns is still one with which the subject can live. This is the sense in which each adult continually re-inspects the 'I', the 'Me', the 'We', and the 'You', which have been part of his or her personal morphogenesis, and then applies his or her autonomous personal powers to pursue their replication or transformation. In the process they actively contribute to their own ongoing personal development and to the continuous shaping of natural reality and its three orders – nature, practice and the social. (Archer 2011, 94)

From Archer's point of view, a reflexive subject is reflexive and emotional and has to handle a threefold world. But their subjectivity does not come down to a mere reflexivity and a *moral comment*. The subject is, above all, driven by concerns. The notion of concern in Archer's theory is closely bound to her concept in the field of philosophical anthropology (Archer 2000). She puts forward a vision of the human, pertinent to the attitude of critical realism and different from the *Modernity's Man's model*, reduced to rationality, even to instrumental rationality which displays its fullest vulgarity in the concept of 'homo economicus'. Archer's opposing attitude comes from the following:

> 'Modernity's Man', as the projection of the Enlightenment tradition, worked strenuously at stripping-down the human being until he or she had one property alone, that of rationality. Rationality was treated as pre-given, and therefore none of our relations with the world contributed anything to making us what we are. (Archer 2000, 3–4)

On the other hand, she explains that:

> the model of *homo economicus* could not deal with our normativity or our emotionality, both of which are intentional, that is they are 'about' relations with our environment – natural, practical and social. […] Instead, the lone, atomistic and opportunistic bargain-hunter stood as the impoverished model of 'man'. (Archer 2000, 4)

Archer also rejects the model of 'Modernity's Man "who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing"' and who therefore lacked the wherewithal to acquire strict personal identity (Archer 2000, 4). A real and separate personal identity has to be, according to Archer, an effect of determining our ultimate concerns and reconciling them with other concerns. Those 'other' concerns, if I understand them correctly, are subjective and conscious motives with which a person enters social relations. One needs to remember, however, that

> Social realists have to be a good deal more precise about these properties and powers of human beings, and how they emerge through our relation with the world, which cannot be narrowly construed as 'society', let alone as 'language', 'discourse' and 'conversation'. (Archer 2000, 7)

Archer goes on to describe what aspects of the above criticized 'models of man' are missing. She says:

> without a continuous sense that we are one and the same being over time, then even the two impoverished models just introduced cannot get off the ground, let alone a more robust conception of humanity. 'Modernity's Man' needs this sense of self if he is consistently to pursue his so-called fixed preference schedule, for he has to know both that they are his preferences and also how he is doing in maximising them over time. Similarly, 'Society's Being' also needs

this sense of self, rather than a grammatical fiction, in order to know that social obligations pertain to her, rather than just being diffuse expectations, and that when they clash, then it is she who is put on the spot, and has to exercise a creativity which cannot be furnished by consulting the discursive canon. (Archer 2000, 7)

Archer expresses her concept of concerns even more explicitly, when she writes:

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as human beings, we necessarily live out our lives in all three orders of reality, natural, practical and social […] human beings as the bearers of a *continuous sense of self*, a property which they acquire early on in life, to their active acquisition of a *personal identity* at maturity. Our selfhood is unique, but it can largely be constituted by the things that have happened to us. Certainly, it entails active interplay with the environment in which individuals find themselves, but it cannot be pro-active in selecting this environment. Personal identity, however, hinges precisely upon the emergence of a mature ability to take a reflective overview of the three orders of reality in which we are ineluctably engaged. Because of our constitution in relation to the constitution of the world, we cannot ignore any of these three orders with impunity: nevertheless, we can prioritise where our predominant concerns lie and accommodate our other concerns to them. It is the distinctive patterning of these concerns which is held to give people their unique personal identities. (Archer 2000, 9)

Margaret S. Archer's theory of concerns and conception of horizon of reference

I believe that the concept drafted above may help reach the core of the phenomenon of violence in the title. Yet before that, let me draw some connections between the concept of subjectivity and horizons of reference in this draft of Archer's theory. I believe that a human, in order to maintain their basic mental health and the ability to develop an identity and personality, must have at least a minimal conviction that they understand the world they are living in and their place in it; because they recognize the reality of the world and want to understand it. This is not a mere result of curiosity, nor a condition for successful actions, but also, and perhaps above all, a question of fundamental existential needs. Therefore, humans take actions with the objective inter alia of comprehending the world. They exercise various practices of understanding and interpreting the objectively existing order of the world. It is because of this that I distinguish between an ontic, a moral and a cognitive order (Wielecki 2003).

As a result of practices of understanding, interpreting and experiencing, we collect a more or less conscious, coherent, full and realistic set of beliefs referring to a theoretical (or an actual) category of the world order. This image we create regarding the world order, its representation (without settling whether it is real or not), constitutes an intellectual space, a mental *topographic map* which directs us and our lives in time and space, especially in the *space* of sense and meaning. This is the basic dimension upon which human identity is formed. I term this space a horizon of reference or a mental order. What a human is directly referring to, is not the world order, as it is not directly accessible for cognition, but to the horizon of reference, which usually is also treated as the real thing despite that being non-observable to subjects and thus not fully accessible to them.

The horizon of reference sets the boundaries to an individual's existence, which epistemologically constitutes his or her existential order. What I understand by the notion of the existential order of an individual is thus the way their experienced world is organized. However, the way in which we understand the world is one thing, and how we are

directing our lives and what order we are attributing to it – is another thing. The existential order is grounded in the practices of life, the framework of action that organizes them within its confines and elements of the horizons of action adapted to the practices of action. Within the horizon of reference, we can then identify the ontological, axiological and epistemological horizon. Within the existential order, in turn, we can identify particular practices of life, oriented towards some values, based on some beliefs about the nature of the world, of people and of oneself. The practices of life are directed by the content of the horizons of reference and can be comprehended within the framework of a subject's actions. The existential order consists of the practices of life, the framework that organises them, but also of some elements of the horizons of reference accepted as premises of practices of acting. The ethical, ontic and cognitive framework delimits the sense and meaning of one's life that are possible within the images of people, of life and of the world.

A human, in the process of acting within the practice of life, communicates with others. The communication is delimited by individual horizons of reference and occurs within specific frameworks of subjects' actions. Thus, a common, though not identical, practice of life emerges. This process has a dual result in the form of individual horizons of reference and, further, of existential orders; yet on the other hand, it is a process of structuring that generates a set of fairly agreed, common horizons of reference (Wielecki 2003, 274 et seq.).

It is important that any major disturbances (decay, disintegration) of the horizons of reference may lead to a deep frustration, and sometimes to disturbances of the human's mental and social development in the form of major mental illnesses and neuroses. A very important dimension of our time, with its triumphing instrumental reflexivity, is the mental crisis of the human and their culture differences as we enter the new millennium. The suffering of contemporary people also has its source in the difficulties that the reflexive subject encounters with constructing horizons of reference that would correspond with reality. One of the aspects of an aching narcissistic individual feeling alone in the universe is the crisis of mental health.

The contemporary post-industrial breakthrough creates peculiar problems in all the three orders in which the human being ineluctably lives, mentioned by Archer. Of course, contemporary life brings to the people of the Western world plenty of good as well: a longer lifespan, many everyday facilities and great inventions, and above all, liberty from all that used to hinder people's individualism in the past. It is worth noticing that we gain much freedom this way, whilst simultaneously losing plenty of it, which we usually fail to notice. The tragedy of the contemporary human, who encounters major difficulties in the process of building horizons of reference, consists in the fact that at the same time, due to the spreading of reflexivity based on the instrumental reason, they lose the ability to use this freedom, because it locks people in their own hearts, isolates them in front of their TV, computer and smartphone screens, it atomises them and condemns us to our egocentric individualism, as foreseen by de Tocqueville for another era. Late modernity induces more and more people into this new individualism, with all its fatal consequences. This is how the crisis of the contemporary human is manifesting itself, at the time of the post-industrial civilizational crisis whose vital dimension is the crisis of individual and collective horizons of reference. An important factor of these difficulties is instrumental rationality that deprives the world, life and the efforts of the

reflexive subject of their sense and meaningfulness in order to rebuild the sense of the world and the meaning of life as a basis for individual and collective existence.

Among the needs whose satisfaction is a condition for mental health and development of the human, one should mention the needs of: security, acceptance, love and friendship, as well as identity, sense and meaning. Although all of these needs are related to the horizons of reference, the latter two are typically assumed to have an especially close relationship with them. I believe that disturbances in individual horizons of reference in a given society have a negative influence on the process of forming the (emergent, at the collective level) horizons of reference, including those consequences, measurable in sociological terms, come from a poor collective horizons of reference.

Here, let me just underline the difficulty of using the psychological category of needs in a sociological theory. The notion of need, in the first place, is not commensurate with the various motivation of human actions, e.g. drives, instincts or – current in philosophical language – especially desires. Second, it does not reflect the essential difference between an objective and an experienced need. Third, the notion of need is barely helpful in analysing collective states. As a whole, the theory of needs developed in psychology fails here, whereas the notion of concern, developed by Archer, seems to be free of those shortcomings.

However, people creating individual and collective horizons of reference are motivated by many concerns. Some concerns are related to the foundations of existence. I would describe them as eschatological, ontic or maybe transcendental concerns. They touch the very essence of the existence of the world, its basic forms and one's own existence. They manifest themselves, above all, in the need to have a sense of the world, including the existential order, i.e. an individual, and to some extent subjectively *experienced world* which, by the way, is never totally subjective, as it is always some attempt to capture reality. The need to have a sense of the world is related to the need for meaning or a desire for our life to make sense that would somehow correspond to our sense of the world. As a matter of fact, these are concerns about the transcendence of the world and of our own self-transcendence. As mentioned earlier, among the horizons of reference one can identify the ontic, the epistemic and the moral horizon.

Age of fear, contemporary escape from value, concept of subjectivity and violence

At this point, one might refer to Paul Tillich's concept, although it had been designed for a bolder form of transcendence. The notion of being, as defined above, leads to considering its actual existence, therefore also its possible nonbeing. However

> nonbeing is not a concept like others. It is the negation of every concept. (Tillich 1952, 34)

If the German philosopher called his times the *age of fear* (Tillich 1952, 35), it seems that not much has changed, apart from the context. Anxiety, as seen from the psychological perspective, is neurotic, which means it has no justification in a real threat here and now. Therefore, it is not fear. Psychology uses the notion of generalized anxiety. This interpretation seems compatible with Tillich's views, although the philosophical analysis goes further. He writes, 'Anxiety and fear have the same ontological root but they are not the same in actuality' (Tillich 1952, 36). What is the nature of this anxiety which, I

would say, is a transcendent and eschatological concern in its character? As the philosopher puts it:

> it is necessary for an ontology of courage to include an ontology of anxiety, for they are interdependent. And it is conceivable that in the light of an ontology of courage some fundamental aspects of anxiety may become visible. The first assertion about the nature of anxiety is this: anxiety is the state in which a being is aware of its possible nonbeing. The same statement, in a shorter form, would read: anxiety is the existential awareness of nonbeing. 'Existential' in this sentence means that it is not the abstract knowledge of nonbeing which produces anxiety but the awareness that nonbeing is a part of one's own being. (Tillich 1952, 35)

The above-mentioned horizons of reference can support people in managing their anxiety. I think, however, that this only applies to the horizons as a construct of a subjective person or a subjective society (in the case of collective horizons). I suppose that the *courage* (or boldness) mentioned by Tillich is an indispensable feature of subjectivity as I understand it. And it gives the power of the *courage* which, in the author's opinion, 'could be met by courage on the basis of participation and love' (Tillich 1952, 38).

I am not going to follow Tillich's thought any further. I am referring only to his idea in order to go back to the question of violence. As previously mentioned, the causes of violence can be numerous, yet always, especially when it means a major harm to our neighbour, it results from aggression; unless it is a cold calculation of a psychopath or necessary self-defence. And aggression is, as maintained, a result of frustration. Therefore, I looked closer at the category of needs and concerns. Yet it was necessary to consider those questions in the light of the concept of the human as they really are, that is: from the perspective of critical realism. This requires an ontological reflection.

The paradigm of critical realism distinguishes us from fantasies coming from other orientations in the humanities, including social sciences, which re-interpret their own images and assumptions, sometimes ignoring reality or its existence altogether. Various so-called naturalistic orientations have been guilty of this (which is particularly harmful for sociology and psychology, when raised upon such foundations). The same weakness is the case for theories accepting a subjective point of view, e.g. symbolic interactionism, interpretative sociology, ethnomethodology, sociological phenomenology or grounded theory, etc. An extreme case is, of course, post-modernism, whose ban upon *grand narratives* applies especially to ontology, and, as a result, also to epistemology. Post-modernism particularly worships the Weberian *prohibition of value judgements*. This attitude results, in the first place, from the total prohibition of any objectifying axiological reflection whatsoever.

I can understand the historical fear of values that would legitimize various forms of totalitarisms. Yet the fact that someone has swallowed a poison does not mean it is healthier not to eat at all. As a result, post-modernism puts forward an astonishing choice of darkness against light. As rightly pointed out by Marek Rembierz:

> The thinking about the ethical aspect of human actions, since Greek philosophy and the biblical texts, is bound to experiencing the world and its image as given in light or engulfed in darkness. This experience and this image are related to a metaphysical interpretation: a particularly human world is given (it exists, it gains sense) in the metaphysical light, or it disappears (undergoes destruction) engulfed in the metaphysical darkness. (Rembierz 2009, 92)

Metaphysics, understood as ontology, is a basis for critical realism or a quest for under-
standing what something is, which is a consequence of the belief that the world really
exists. Marek Rembierz points out the particularly disturbing consequences of suspending
an objective ethical reflection. He invokes, among others, Stefan Morawski who coined the
term *axiological night*. Morawski wrote with concern about the post-modern procedure of
suspending axiological reflection, which resulted in the *axiological night* and a world

> where all the animals are grey, as it is a long axiological night. (Morawski 1992, 44)
> Announced by the post-modernists as a progress, for Morawski it was a symptom of a
> cultural crisis: a sense of total powerlessness in a world people don't know how to live in. (Mor-
> awski 1992, 44)

The willingness to escape from axiological totalism which would hide a crouching monster
of totalitarism in general has some paranoid features which make one call darkness light
and the other way around. Remaining in Rembierz's and Morawski's metaphor of darkness,
it is worth recalling the view of Leszek Kołakowski who wrote about the:

> darkness, where everything is equally good, equally indifferent. To believe I am the almighty
> lawmaker of every possible sense is to believe there are no reasons for creating and issuing
> any laws whatsoever. (Kołakowski 1990, 152)

The desire to understand the phenomenon of violence and its ethical meaning requires
founding it in axiological objectivism and in the ontology of the human in general.
Because if, according to Erich Fromm quoted earlier, only a human is capable of malign
aggression, it is worth reflecting on what this 'human' feature consists in. It most probably
results from the capability acquired only by our species, which is abstract thinking, higher
emotions (which does not always mean the noble ones) and dreaming up plans for a
distant future, sometimes quite ambitious ones and complex secondary needs. This
adds dynamics to human activity and enables a highly complicated culture. But it also
broadens the *space* for frustration.

Thinking about violence should proceed in multiple directions. It is important to con-
sider the limits of an acceptable or sometimes even a necessary violence. It is indispensa-
ble to design and develop methods of counteracting violence whenever it causes
unjustified harm. In the first place, we need to be vigilant about mass and particularly
severe forms of violence, such as human trafficking, terrorism, wars, etc. Studies in crimi-
nology, law, techniques of detecting and counteracting, systems of sanctions, methods of
education, resocialization, social and cultural causes and the ways violence manifests itself,
etc. are required. Studies in victimology would also probably be useful.

The possible causes of aggression are countless. One should begin with investigating
the most frequent, most drastic, most cruel and those most tragic in their consequences.
Yet, we will always come back to the initial question: why is someone aggressive? And
what we will find is the presence of frustration as a result of being deprived of human con-
cerns. One can classify these concerns in various ways. For instance, people can exercise
violence because of: unsatisfied material concerns and lack of respect, love, etc. However,
people are sometimes aggressive despite the presence of these things in their lives.
Perhaps this is due to generalized neurotic reactions. A human, without knowing why,
may be unhappy; they may have a sense of discomfort or feel disadvantaged. It may
also happen that some people do not show aggression even when they are suffering a

severe state of deprivation. Not exercising aggression towards others may be the result of the fear of punishment or strong norms. However, there is also aggression directed towards the self. Violence thus motivated can remain unseen.

Of course, socio-cultural mechanisms for preventing violence, including aggression, have their power. Yet it seems that those mechanisms are ceasing to work effectively, as the number of particularly cruel offenses is rising. The number of addictions and suicides is increasing, which, as we know from Durkheim, are the polar types of aggression directed inwards or outwards. But many people follow their other concerns which are more important in their hierarchy of concerns. These are mechanisms for discharging nervous tension: aesthetic and moral experiences, sports, the confessional and others.

Also, other kinds of concerns are worth noticing, namely those which may be a vital source of frustration, especially if subjected to strong and long-term deprivation. These, if satisfied, could be a source of natural auto-therapy, tranquillity, inner harmony and happiness. Thus, they counteract or at least discharge aggression. They are more or less obvious in their character and therefore are barely a subject of psychological or sociological investigations. I mean concerns that could be described as eschatological, ontological or transcendent or could be called a longing for the absolute. As I said before, these manifest themselves mainly in the need for sense and meaning. They are a particularly strong motivation for creating horizons of reference.

Their particular meaning consists in the fact that the way one manages them depends on the human's basic orientation (primary orientation): a subjective or, on the contrary, an authoritarian one. By subjectivity, I mean traits of personality, values and actions of a subject, directed to *being-toward-life, hope and good* (I cannot elaborate on this idea here; it was elaborated on in my book on subjectivity; Wielecki 2003). What I mean here, in particular, are the authoritarian values, actions and personal traits based upon hostility (a particular form of aggression), distrust, depression, etc. This is a highly generalized way in which reflexive and emotional human beings, driven by their own concerns, orient themselves towards the three world orders[1] (or maybe five, but let me save this for another occasion). It is here, I believe, one should seek one of the most important keys for understanding violence.

Conclusions

It seems that the hypotheses presented in the preface have been partially substantiated. There is no doubt that in order to substantiate them more fully, further studies are required. In my view, the goals of this article would be accomplished, if the need for such further studies were justified and the probability of the preliminary hypotheses were received in a positive manner. At the end of the day, the evaluation of this is the task of the reader.

In short, I confirm that violence is not a part of human 'nature', nor is it a normal human feature. On the contrary: it results from a disturbance of mental health, therefore from deficiency in 'normality'. Violence is, in my opinion, a result of a specific type of aggression caused by frustration. What interested me most in this case was the special kind of aggression termed by Erich Fromm, as *malignant*. According to this philosopher and psychologist it characterises only humans. I find largely justified the hypothesis that the peculiarity of

this uniquely human form of aggression is caused by, among other factors, a specific kind of frustration which can result only from being deprived simultaneously of many needs. These are, above all, the needs for sense and meaning. It is, I claim further, a result of basic difficulties in managing the exceptionally human and important concerns, which are transcendent concerns. This situation, relates to contemporary changes, which are civilizational in character, which render it difficult (or sometimes even impossible) to develop individual and collective horizons of reference, thus leading to disturbances in mental health and impairing the process of human subjectivity maturing – an extremely important factor tending to diminish violence.

I present the most important conclusions in the following bullet points:

- It is impossible to agree with the naturalistic and psychoanalytic concepts of violence in humanity, as a natural, obvious and essential feature of human nature, which is only restrained by the social and cultural muzzle.
- Understanding human violence requires reflection on the essence of human persons – their ontology.
- According to Margaret Archer's theory, the basis for understanding the human person is their concerns. The same goes for understanding human violence.
- The structure of human concerns would be multilevel, complex and sophisticated.
- Among the very important concerns of the human person whose deprivation can cause violence, there are also the most basic and subtle ones. Among them, there are eschatological, ontic and transcendental concerns.
- These concerns must include those that appear as the need for horizons of reference. They are related to the needs for the meaning of the world and the importance of one's own life. Although, as I believe, they have more elementary nature.
- The descriptive secularized, eclectic culture of our time, dictated by the 'instrumental reason', causes widespread and severe deprivation of the aforementioned concerns. This is a very important factor accounting for the mass scale and the perpetration of violence in today's world.

Note

1. This is obviously the synthesis of the views of M. S. Archer.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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