The Concept of Violence

Understanding political violence is a principal preoccupation for anyone interested in politics, professional politicians and social scientists alike, which explains why in recent years there has been an influx of books on the topic of political violence, widely defined. The proliferation of interest in political violence in academic circles is to be welcomed. In particular the empirically-driven output from sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists and political scientists has been relentless, impressive in its quantity if not always its quality.

In recent years the bulk of these publications have tended to be edited volumes based on ethnographic case studies rich in the exposé of violence in all its forms, from hate crime to genocide. Generally speaking each case study is informative and revealing, yet the reluctance of the editors to ground the disparate ethnographic case studies on a shared definition of violence takes away from the theoretical value of these books. We may learn a great deal about specific acts of political violence occurring within certain cultures in different parts of the world, without necessarily having a better understanding of the meaning of violence as a universal concept. At best these volumes remind us of the complexity of violence, they do not help us to understand it.

One of the aims of this book is to argue for the need of a clear, universally valid definition of violence, to be formulated with the help of the unfashionable but reliable technique of conceptual analysis. In the last analysis, distinguishing a violent act from an act of violence (Chapter One), attempting a comprehensive definition of violence (Chapter Two), deciding whether omissions that
allow harm to occur should count as acts of violence (Chapter Three), specifying the role that intentionality plays in an act of violence (Chapter Four), and highlighting the main features of the concept of violence (Chapter Five) is the sort of invaluable contribution that only philosophical conceptual analysis can make, bringing clarity and precision in an area of research still very much confused and confusing. Furthermore, it is only after the concept of violence has been defined, and its many obscure aspects clarified, that normative questions can be asked about the nature of an act of violence, for example determining why violence is bad and prima facie wrong (Chapter Six), revealing the overlap between political violence and social injustice (Chapter Seven and Eight), or establishing when and how violence can be justified (Chapter Nine).

For the most part this book will ignore the extensive empirical research on political violence, with the exception of specific examples throughout the book which only serve the purpose of elucidating theoretical distinctions or principles, and one longer specific case study on exploitation in Chapter Eight. The decision to restrict the scope of this work to questions of a more theoretical nature should not be interpreted as an indictment on empirical research, since there are some outstanding works in this tradition. But it would be impossible to do justice to the full complexity of the phenomenon of political violence in one short book, therefore our scope will necessarily have to be much more modest, restricted to a philosophical analysis of the concept of violence.

One of the aims of this book is to propose and defend a new definition of the concept of violence. This task will be undertaken in Chapter Two, where an account of violence as a violation of integrity will be put forward. Of course any attempt to present a ‘new’ definition of a concept necessarily builds upon the previous history of this concept. The concept of violence is not an exception. Thus, the idea of violence as a violation of integrity builds upon two other well-known historical approaches to understanding the nature of violence. The first approach, which takes a minimalist line, defines violence as an act of excessive physical force. The other approach, which takes a broader line, suggests a definition of violence in terms of a violation of rights. These two approaches will be the subject of this first chapter. It is necessary to explore both the strengths and weaknesses of these two approaches not only as a mark of respect for all the important work that philosophers have done over the years, but also in order