Notes on Lorenzo Magnani Understanding Violence

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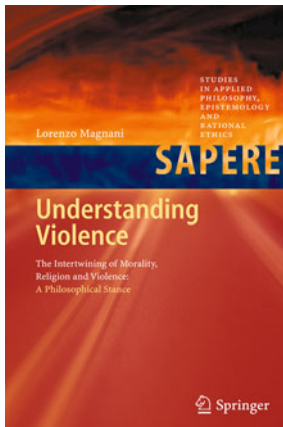
BOOK REVIEW

Notes on Lorenzo Magnani

Understanding Violence
The intertwining of morality, religion and violence: a philosophical stance.

Springer-Verlag, Berlin-Heidelberg, 2011, doi:10.1007/978-3-642-21972-6

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Lorenzo Magnani's book is a broad and deep meditation on the theme of violence. For the author, the theoretical and methodological problem lies not in trying to find a privileged access to the issue of violence, but rather to raise this issue to the status of an independent, chiefly philosophical subject. This requires a strategic twofold move: on the one hand, one needs a strong and comprehensive philosophical hypothesis about violence; on the other, it is necessary to bring to a theoretical unity the plurality or, to put it differently, the fragmentation of analyses consecrated to the issue of violence—and this result is achieved precisely thanks to a comprehensive philosophical hypothesis.

The hypothesis that motivates Magnani's analysis is constructed in two stages: first, the author posits that violence cannot be considered as a primary fact and separated from the rest of human experience, such as a spark that lights up in the dark because of a sort of spontaneous combustion. Instead, violence is part of the human experience, and partakes of the need—common to all human beings—to make sense of the world around them, a world in which they must also interact with each other. Hence the second aspect of the author's hypothesis: violence is inextricably linked, by way of contrast, to the conceptual evolution of morality and religion, namely, with the specific manner in which changes in time and space affect our—immanent and transcendent—moral experience of the world.

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In this sense, the fact that violence is a fact of life for every stage and location of humankind does not make it a super-historical, meta-temporal, and non-spatial concept. In fact, the notion of violence is continuously connected with the time and place in which it occurs, as a by-product of a precise cultural era and context. The sense of fracture and interruption which seems to necessarily characterize the violent act or, as saying goes, the "outburst" of violence does not break or interrupt any pretended temporal continuity and spatial homogeneity, but rather it discloses and manifests them as its own conditions of possibility. In others terms if violence, for instance, is always (or at least often) conceived as the violation of a sacred space, it is not violence itself that defines the edges of this space, but morality and religion.

Violence does not belong, therefore, to the 'order of things', in an alleged relationship of mutual exclusion with morality and religion, but lives of a close mutual involvement and interdependence with morality and religion, and it evolves with them. The hypothesis of Magnani could usefully be extended to the field of law studies, in relation to which the issue of violence is often invoked. Frequently, philosophers of law or politics tend to explain the idea of law with reference to the idea of violence. Some scholars hold that the law has the aspiration to eliminate or at least to limit the original violence that characterizes human relationships (in a hypothetical "state of nature," but in practice even in the midst of civil society). Others even claim that the law comes from a sort of primary violence, that the law would like to delimit but of which it always keeps the track. In both cases, violence is seen as a primary out-breaking event, namely, as a spark that flares up in the darkness of human reason, as already pointed out.

Magnani leads us to believe that the idea of law does not need to refer to the idea of violence more than the idea of violence needs reference to the idea of law. There is not, in other words, any pre-existence or priority of violence over law: the law is not a cultural by-product generated by an original violence: both of them are cultural products and, to a large extent, are conceptually coextensive. Sexual violence, for instance, has been classified (in Italy) as a crime against a 'person' only in a more mature stage of the legal and moral reflection on the concept of dignity and integrity of the person: this has required a certain lapse of time, and for people to disengage from previous moral considerations and engage a different axiology.

Magnani's philosophical approach to the issue of violence, as noted above, is able to blend together and synthesize different perspectives and contributions: from cognitivism to evolutionary theory, from biology to moral philosophy, politics and law studies. And yet, the novelty of this approach lies in a further element, namely the necessity of forging (or making use) of different conceptual tools, able to account for the complex and multifaceted reality of violence. From this point of view, the book is extremely rich and it is not possible, in this review, to take into minute consideration the many arguments and discussions presented in the book.

Therefore, we must limit our analysis to three concepts in particular, adopted and further developed by Magnani, that constitute the theoretical cornerstone on which the general structure of the book rests: (1) the theory of military intelligence and coalition enforcement, which explains the evolutionary origin of violence; (2) the

notion of moral bubble, the veil of which prevents us from fully perceive the dependency relationship between violence and morality (or religion); and (3) the idea of cognitive-moral niches, explaining how the experience of violence participates to the eco-logical and cultural construction of our evolutionary relationship of adapting to the environment.

We start from the first theory. As already noted, violence is not a purely individual and episodic event. It is a distributed phenomenon that concerns a community of people organizing themselves and seeking to establish the criteria of their social cohesion. Those criteria are not always established by means of deliberative processes but more often by means of self-organizing mechanisms, whose violent character is not always fully perceived, precisely because of that moral "embubblement" which we will discuss shortly. Social cohesion depends on the capability ("military intelligence") of a group to cooperate "through morality," in order to elaborate a series of social norms (normative/social information) that allow a part of the community to anticipate and neutralize ("coalition enforce-ment") the deviant behaviors of those who intend to enjoy the benefits of the community, without addressing its costs. With this in mind, the perception of individual and episodic forms of violence, linked to deviant behaviors, is nothing but the effect of the collective axiology that grounds the cooperation aimed at maintaining social cohesion.

According to this theory, at the foundation of a community we would find neither a violent instinct nor an altruistic tendency but only the need to develop and share a variety of information (normative/social) through language, which allows a group to break away from an alleged indistinct backdrop (e.g. the "state of nature", etc.), in order to recognize itself and adapt to the environment. This can happen through a system in which morality and violence are interdependent or, to state it differently, in which violence and morality are two faces of the same coin. In this perspective, language is the fundamental symbolic operator that gives the world its depth, establishing a line of differentiation between nature and culture in the first instance, and then between morality and violence perceived as such: in this sense, this work of differentiation is itself not devoid of a certain violence or *performativity* (since it delineates morality from violence), and responds to our need to adapt to the world and learn from the experience itself of our evolutionary process of adaptation.

The differentiation between morality and violence makes us capable of living in a community due to the extent of social cohesion that it is able to produce. This differentiation is much more socially acceptable since its occurrence, as an effect of language, remains unspoken. The moral bubble that presides over the concealment of the interdependent relation between morality and violence pushes us to perceive this relation as a difference *in the matter*, that is, to perceive morality and violence as two separate and independent realms having their own ontological status. In a sense, a moral bubble acts as counterfeit money, by covering the difference with itself, that is, between counterfeit and real money: counterfeit money can actually be effective only insofar as it is taken as true currency. In other terms, counterfeit money has not its own ontological and pragmatic status, independent from that of true money.

The moral bubble prevents us from recognizing that the perception of some behaviors as violent is governed by moral considerations that remain unspoken, concealed or simply unperceived. Accordingly, just to consider a single example of this intellectual process, every age and culture has a distinctive and specific way of conceiving what is a murder (drawing its conceptual boundaries) and when this is condemnable (drawing its ethical or legal boundaries). For example: is it lawful or morally acceptable to remove a fetus? To kill an enemy during war? To eliminate ourselves if disheartened, sick or unhappy with life? To sentence someone to death penalty? The answer to these questions resides on the thin line of differentiation between morality and violence: this does not happen from scratches but within the cognitive-moral niches we construct as mediating structures between us and the environment.

With respect to cognitive niches, let us refer directly to Magnani's explanation: "humans are *eco- logical engineers*. Not only technologies and other artifacts are part of this ecology but also morality and, of course violent modes of problem solving. That is to say, humans (like other creatures) do not simple live *in* their environment, but they actively shape and change it while looking for suitable chances. In doing so, they construct *cognitive niches* through which the offerings provided by the environment in terms of cognitive possibilities are appropriately selected and/or manufactured to enhance their fitness as chance seekers" (p. 116). In other words, cognitive niches are mediating structures between humans and their environment, built in order to enable "organisms [to] adapt to their environments but also [to] adapt to environments as reconstructed by themselves or other organisms" (p. 118). Therefore, we move from the construction of ecological niches, which modify the environment in order to better exploit its resources, to the construction of cognitive niches, which store relevant information that can be extracted and picked up upon occasion, in order to enhance human fitness to the reconstructed environment. Cognitive niches may operate as moral niches, when morality is "considered as part of the niche's distributed knowledge, and it precisely concerns violence insofar as it regulates (also violent) relationships between individuals in the niche and with those that are confronted with it without actually partaking of it" (p. 123).

To go back for a while to our previous example, let us consider the idea of a murder that is accomplished by the state itself. In the legal systems that include death penalty, the state's response to some deviant behaviors can be to inflict death onto the perpetrators of specific crimes. In this case, murder is viewed as a moral/legal punishment and at same time as a violent elimination of a human being: death penalty operates as a moral mediator that makes us 'perceive' (this is the essence of death penalty: i.e., being always something exhibited, an exhibition) that a necessarily violent execution can be morally or legally legitimated. In other words, it is a way to channel widespread energies (the perpetration of a crime, the state's response, the violence of execution, etc.) in the framework of a cognitive-moral niche, where they can be extracted from and picked up upon occasion (as a legal precedent, a social warning, a reinforcement of a collective axiology, etc.). This example also shows that different cognitive-moral niches may collide with each other, because they endorse different collective axiologies or opposite moral

mediators: many legal systems have in fact banned death penalty, because the energy stemming from its ban can be even more fruitfully channeled to ensure social cohesion within the legal framework of the fundamental right to life integrity as a different moral mediator.

After this long excursus throughout Magnani's book, let us draw some conclusions and make some final remarks. Magnani's meditation is ultimately aimed at acknowledging the idea that humans beings are intrinsically "violent beings" (p. VIII). However, this is not a demise of morality. On the contrary, we can only account for what we have given rise to throughout our adaptive or maladaptive response to the evolutionary process. Accordingly, we agree with the idea that understanding violence could ultimately be of great help in order to achieve "a safer ownership of our destinies," by individuating and reinforcing those cognitive firewalls that "could prevent violence from becoming overwhelming" (p. VIII), that is to say, from escalating and overflowing.

The fruitfulness of Magnani's approach to violence may be measured by applying its theoretical framework—based on the close mutual involvement and interdependence of violence with morality—to two further connected issues: the violence against ourselves and the circularity of violence. These topics are rarely addressed in philosophical terms but our impression is that Magnani's framework opens the possibility to make some philosophical hypothesis about these deserving issues.

The book helps us acknowledging that not all the forms of violence against ourselves can indeed be explained in terms of mental disturbs. Sometimes, violence against ourselves is just not perceived as such because of the conditioning effect of the moral bubble we partake of. Think for instance of the radical, yet not uncommon, cases of some artists or athletes that renounce to almost all of their social life, in order to achieve better performances (a perfect piano performance; a world record; etc.), to the point of endangering their own sanity. The moral significance (the glory of art; the feeling of immortality; the honor of the state; etc.) of their gesture prevents them from perceiving the harm they can inflict themselves, and pushes them to label the self-inflicted violence in the more acceptable terms of sacrifice. Many similar instances seem to be captured by Magnani's philosophical framework and result more vividly explainable in such terms.

The idea of the circularity of violence has been subject to many analyses (psychotherapy; anthropology; literature; studies on myths; etc.). It is a distributed and impressive phenomenon, according to which people inflict and pass onto others the same sufferance and violence they have suffered from in the past. This circularity may be also understood as something linked, in this case, to a disguised engagement and disengagement from morality, since people who have suffered from violence feel that it was *unjust* to be the innocent and contingent victims of violence. However (or rather *therefore*) this often pushes them to believe (more or less consciously) that it is someway *just* to inflict and pass onto others the same violence they suffered, precisely *because* the new victims are perceived innocent, and worth punishment because of this *spoiled* innocence. The reviviscence of the drama can make the perpetrators believe (illusorily) to be disengaged from the

morality they previously agreed to, precisely because of the authorship of their violence.

Maybe, the violence we commit against ourselves, and the circularity of violence, are just radical, untreatable cases of violence that escape from philosophical understanding. Nonetheless, our idea is that the philosophical framework elaborated by Lorenzo Magnani could be fruitfully applied to several cases and opens up the way to a more systematic and close examination of the issue of violence, hopefully leading to a comprehensive philosophy of violence.