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7 **Book Review**

9 **Reflections on *Understanding Violence***

10
 11 Jeffrey Benjamin White, PhD.
 12 541 NE 42nd Street #203
 13 Boca Raton, Florida 33431
 14 jbenjaminwhite@mail.com

16 **Review of**

17 Lorenzo Magnani (2011). *Understanding violence: The intertwining of morality, religion and violence: a philosophical stance*. Berlin: Springer-Verlag.

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 22 Lorenzo Magnani's *Understanding Violence: The Intertwining of Morality, Religion and Violence* is a big
 23 book. Not big in the sense of page count or prepublication advertisement, but big in the sense of pregnant
 24 with potential application. Professor Magnani is explicit in his intentions, "to show how violence is de facto
 25 intertwined with morality, and how much violence is hidden, and invisibly or unintentionally performed"
 26 (page 273) while confessing a personal motivation, "warning myself (and every reader) that violence is
 27 traceable back to my (our) own door." (page 66) This is not an easy task, given the slippery expanse of his
 28 subject, to drag violence out of the shadows, bringing it home to each personal purveyor. But Magnani
 29 succeeds, and fruitfully. *Understanding Violence* deftly exposes violence in its myriad forms from individual
 30 aggression to colliding global-historical narratives. It does this by detailing the processes whereby people act
 31 from moralities of their own creation, adopting various moral frameworks including those specific to
 32 religions, social and political groups, as well as personal constructs, and in terms of which "they engage and
 33 disengage both intentionally and unintentionally, in a strict interplay between morality and violence." (page
 34 184) Resolving these complex dynamics through simple models and illustrations, *Understanding Violence*
 35 elevates the reader from the forest-for-the-trees perpetual-crisis-blindness symptomatic of the present era, to
 36 a position from which personal moral commitments as practical, as necessary, and as the source of hidden
 37 violence are clearly visible. Moreover, due to the practicality of Magnani's demonstrations, it continues in
 38 this work long after the text itself is laid back on the shelf.

39 With a focus on demonstrating the power of knowledge and understanding "to avoid producing unethical
 40 and violent effects," (page 58) *Understanding Violence* extends a theme central to Magnani's previous book,
 41 *Morality in a Technological World: Knowledge as Duty*. In the briefest of terms, what we think that we know
 42 determines how we value things, including other knowledge and carriers and creators of knowledge, objects
 43 and other human beings. From this rather uncontroversial thesis, *Knowledge as Duty* confronts us with the
 44 fact that we endow some non-living things with more moral significance than we do human beings, and treat
 45 them accordingly. He then defends the rather controversial assertion, repeated in *Understanding Violence*,
 46 that "people have to be respected as things," by which Magnani means that "various "things" often have
 47 more intrinsic value than a human being and so in these cases we can learn to re-attribute to humans the new
 48 moral value we have envisaged in those recently "dignified things." (page 21) In learning to value human
 49 beings at least as much as we value things, we begin to achieve the knowledge necessary to act without
 50 causing injury, intentional or otherwise. Thus, knowledge is a fundamental moral duty. And, it is a duty
 51 deserving urgent attention, for two basic reasons. One, of all of the artifacts available to human beings –
 52 more than nuclear warheads, political demagogues, or antipsychotic pharmaceuticals – knowledge holds the
 53 greatest promise in curtailing violence. And two, knowledge is not valued highly enough to ensure that this

54 promise is realized. “Unfortunately, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we can see that in Western
 55 European and North American societies, at least, knowledge and culture do not appear to be a priority.”
 56 (page 154) In *Understanding Violence*, Magnani shows that, unless we are satisfied with the current global
 57 trajectory, knowledge must be our priority.

58 *Understanding Violence* works outward from a central semiological thesis grounded in a sophisticated
 59 articulation of evolutionary theory, recognizing that evolution proceeds by purposive habitation alongside
 60 “random” mutation. On this picture, human beings mimic each other as they pull significant objects from a
 61 continuum of information, impregnating some with value while neglecting the remainder, a remainder that
 62 may well hide those objects of greatest significance, including violence as well as those necessary for the
 63 active realization of a secure and peaceful future, e.g. different human beings, what they know, and by
 64 extension other sentient creatures, the natural environment, and what these represent. Facilitating the
 65 exposition, Magnani carefully develops a powerful heuristic in the physical metaphor of bubbles and
 66 embubblement. Embubblement is a condition universal to semiotic agents, with bubbles, more or less
 67 “viscous” and insular, constraining cognition, perception, and evaluation as well as encouraging action
 68 accordingly. As the exposition gains momentum, these semiological bubbles are set in motion as moral
 69 inertial frames on courses plotted through all the rich dimensions of guiding historical and religious
 70 narrative. And, through this rather exhilarating extension of the theory of niche construction, Magnani is able
 71 to demonstrate how people actively shape the environment in terms of which they learn to value themselves,
 72 others, and even the natural environment itself, directing evolutionary pressures while contributing to the
 73 conceptual inheritance that in turn affects the cognitive development of ensuing generations. “Accordingly,
 74 we may argue that the creation of cognitive niches is the way cognition evolves, and humans can be
 75 considered as ecological cognitive engineers.” (page 129) In the construction of the conceptual landscape in
 76 terms of which people must live, human beings also establish routine actions appropriate to these cognitive
 77 ecologies, thereby transforming neutral natural environmental forces into active, embubbling morality. Thus,
 78 as “cognitive niches are also moral niches insofar as they implicitly specify the most suitable behaviors to
 79 activate in order to exploit the various cognitive chances provided by the environment,” (page 193) humans
 80 can be considered ecological moral engineers, as well.

81 The bulk of *Understanding Violence* consists in Magnani demonstrating the violence inherent in this
 82 engineering and ongoing reinforcement of cognitive/moral niches, and the importance of language in these
 83 processes is established early on. The exposition begins in terms of coalitions and their enforcement as
 84 effectively military enterprises (Chapter 1), and then focuses directly on the violent nature of language so
 85 employed. (Chapter 2) Magnani assesses the role of language in the maintenance of niches and in the
 86 enforcement of their established conventions, for example with the informal use of language in gossip
 87 exposed as an insidious form of verbal mobbing. Central to both violence and morality, language is a source
 88 of moral worth altogether. Without language, there is no potential for a moral claim, no moral claimant, and
 89 so no moral consideration. Animals who cannot speak have their moral worth denied, while humans without
 90 the same languages, or who by way of language are otherwise classified as outside of the reigning moral
 91 bubble, are afforded similar treatment. Thereby, language is uncovered in the fundamental ontology of
 92 violence, as the “great divider” of the world, a tool of violence “exactly like a knife” with “the usual abstract
 93 functions of syntactic languages, such as conceptualization,” “strictly intertwined with the basic military
 94 nature of communication” and so “intrinsically “moral” (protecting the group by obeying shared norms), and
 95 at the same time “violent” (for example, killing or mobbing to protect the group).” (Page 53) So armed with
 96 language, rigid in linguistic convention, insular and divisive, Magnani comes to the inevitable conclusion
 97 that “human beings who do not share similar languages can live in incommensurable worlds.” (Page 51) And
 98 it is here, in the inelastic collision of incommensurable worlds, semiological bubbles bristling with knife-
 99 points of language, that the most spectacular forms of violence erupt.

100 Expanding these fundamental notions to the contemporary social-political realm, Magnani reviews four
 101 conditions grounding a roughly Habermasian view of democratic legitimacy which, if maximized, should
 102 discourage violence by encouraging the experience and wisdom permissive of the mutual tolerance and
 103 respect on which functioning pluralistic society depends: diversity of opinion, independence, decentralization
 104 and aggregation, with the proviso that, as these conditions are loosened, enlightened groups slide into
 105 tyrannical mobs. (page 94) Worthy of note is that these four conditions are easily visualized on his moral
 106 bubble heuristic as forces that maximize the permeability of bubbles while dulling the blade of the linguistic
 107 knife, reducing “viscosity” and lowering surface tension, thereby quenching fear and encouraging the free-
 108 flow of ideas that facilitates both perspective-taking and compassion in cooperative progress toward a more
 109 peaceful world. Wading through the contemporary tides of moral inertia running contrary to these principles,

110 Magnani takes on some controversial issues, including 9/11 and the perpetual state of emergency constitutive
 111 of “law-making violence” contributing to the accelerating disintegration of democratic institutions and rise of
 112 ochlocracy (Chapter 3), the deepening divide between cultural and language communities through the
 113 increasing rigidity of embubbling conventions that at once hobbles the intellect while encouraging violence
 114 through fallacious reasoning, confabulatory rhetoric, and straight-up bullshit (Chapter 4), pure evil and
 115 psychopathy as over-moralization, over-criminalization and the rise of the fascist state of mind (Chapter 5),
 116 and the myth of religion as violent, its institutionalization and the perversion of faith (Chapter 6). Ultimately,
 117 Magnani calls on the reader to look beyond inherited moralities and belief systems for the conceptual
 118 resources necessary to forge constructive, nonviolent solutions to emerging problems, recognizing the
 119 inherent value in knowledge and in other human beings as carriers of the knowledge necessary for the
 120 process, with the closing words “Let us begin.”

121 Such a sentiment might be passed off as theater were it not for that fact that *Understanding Violence*
 122 offers a remarkable preparation for positively informed future moral action. While reflecting on the text for
 123 this review, I was struck by just how much of Magnani's exposition had infiltrated my daily thinking,
 124 testimony to his effective employment of illustrations and models in making a lasting impression on the way
 125 that I now reason about violence. For example, in listening to a recent installment of the popular American
 126 radio show *This American Life*, “What I Did for Love,” one of Magnani’s demonstrations came to the fore.
 127 In laying out the semiotic origins of violence as deception, and touching on what may be called “evil,”
 128 Magnani offers the example of a species of firefly whose females signal to the males of multiple species that
 129 they are interested in copulation. (Chapter 3) Upon responding to these signals, the males are then predated
 130 by the females - consumed. This violent deceit, were it to emerge in human beings rather than in fireflies,
 131 would be immediately condemned as immoral. Or, so one might presume. But, interestingly, we can take
 132 Magnani's example and apply it to the case of police officers invested in the “war on drugs,” itself a
 133 deceptive use of signs - after all, one cannot “war” on things. Police officers in the USA are encouraged to
 134 lie to other people in effort to catch them “in the act,” even if this means causing the very actions that they
 135 are presumably tasked with discouraging. This process is poignantly captured in the recent case of an
 136 undercover cop posing as a teen-ager, who, seducing a “fellow” high school student, employed the enthralled
 137 boy to get her marijuana, thus ruining his life with drug trafficking charges - the subject of Act 2 of the
 138 aforementioned radio show. One may object to the comparison, but there seems little significant difference
 139 between the actions of the “femme fatale firefly” and the undercover narc with as little difference in the
 140 threats posed by their deceptions – the destruction of a sentient creature’s future prospects in response to
 141 nonviolent, indeed willing cooperation. One may seem more immediate, but both are deadly violence
 142 recognizing that Federal law could send this young man to an American prison, where rates of HIV infection
 143 are 4x the national average, and roughly 14% of inmates report being raped. One might also object on the
 144 grounds that the police officer is able to recognize the inherent violence, if not immorality, of her actions,
 145 and so desist, while not so for the insect. However, Magnani accounts for this moral failure, as well, citing
 146 that “especially in human collectives, violation detection is the most precious tool for ensuring that social
 147 norms (implicit and explicit) are honored” and that “in modern humans violence activated by the detectors to
 148 control transgression is seen by them as *morally* justified,” (page 30) thus explaining the irony that the
 149 nonviolent victim of systematic violence is somehow guilty of a victimless crime.

150 Also of particular interest for myself, having recently published on the subject, is the treatment of
 151 psychopathy in *Understanding Violence*. (Chapter 5) Reviewing the common interpretation from neurology,
 152 that the psychopath is affectively unattached to any morality whatsoever, Magnani offers the intriguing, and
 153 rather more consistent interpretation that the psychopath is instead morally “retarded,” cemented in a “rigid”
 154 selfish moral bubble the terms of which are “not open to quick and appropriate revisions.”(page 187) This
 155 interpretation makes sense of the psychopathic preoccupation with power, and of the fact that once
 156 psychopaths seize power of institutions and governments, these become increasingly intolerant of deviations,
 157 more “rigid” - Hitler's lock-stepping brown-shirts being the over-worn historical example - much more
 158 focused on control - systematic surveillance and “overcriminalization” in classic police state form - while at
 159 once bristling with such rhetoric as “We are a nation of laws,” laws which, notably, seem often not to apply
 160 to the psychopathic law-makers and their enforcers, themselves. Moreover, such profligate “legal” violence
 161 is not without consequence. The net result of this “overmoralization” and “overcriminalization” is the
 162 “impoverishment” of the cognitive/moral niche. “The impoverishment of a cognitive niche can be described
 163 as the permanent loss of certain cognitive chances due to a pauperizing structural re-organization of the
 164 environment affecting the way external resources are accessed and moral sensory stimulation is nested,”
 165 (page 193) with violence being “more likely to emerge in connection with the impoverishment of the

166 cognitive niches one lives in." (page 192) Life in a pauperized niche is marked by "moral sensory
 167 deprivation," effectively a learned incapacity to identify right action, caused by "a huge quantity of
 168 fragmentary, often contradictory, moral values and allegiances, that affect human behavior in confusing and
 169 conflicting ways," the complexity of which "makes people simply ignorant of *basic* moral rules which would
 170 be instead useful for their practical life in a community, to avoid potential violent conflicts." (page 275)

171 Poignantly, this discussion raises the specter of self-defeating niche maintenance, with much of what a
 172 person routinely does in contribution to such a pauperizing structure not only encouraging violence, but
 173 running contrary to human survival on the whole. Though, in the end, Magnani does acknowledge that moral
 174 agency depends on structured and delimited moral/cognitive frameworks, as "Religion, morality, moral
 175 knowledge and teaching enhance and permit free will because they impose order on the randomness of
 176 human behaviors, giving people a better chance of owning their destinies," (page 253) this acknowledgment
 177 comes with a caveat. The over-enforcement of semiological bubbles such as that witnessed in the
 178 surveillance-societies-cum-police-states of the contemporary West does not further prospects of human
 179 survival, but instead results in moral impoverishment, disempowerment, fear, increased violence, and
 180 ultimately tragedy. "As people start conforming, the main consequence is that the total level of information
 181 available to the group simply diminishes and so does the chance to have that piece of information vital to
 182 solving the problem at stake." (page 98) In summary, people resort to violence when their ideas run out. And,
 183 in an impoverished niche under psychopathic rule, all of the good ideas are illegal. However, with extinction
 184 via technologically mediated mass violence a very real problem at stake, ideas now are more important than
 185 ever. So, something has to change.

186 Against this backdrop, Magnani promotes the promise of a knowledge-based society. His assertion that
 187 knowledge is a fundamental moral duty is grounded in the recognition that the things of the world are signs
 188 that lead us to feel and to act in given ways, with survival dependent on realizing the salience and
 189 significance in the information available. *Understanding Violence* is motivated by the recognition that, if we
 190 are ever to act from knowledge to realize something other than 'the habits of which our identities are made,'
 191 to approximate Magnani's quotation of Žižek, we must be able to see self and world ordered otherwise.
 192 Though some base of tractable information is necessary, it is the free access to new ideas coupled with the
 193 capacity to appreciate them that stems the tides of violence. Such is the value in strategies of nonviolence,
 194 for example, as they promote a "moral epistemology" that reveals "the "inessentiality" or "nothingness" of
 195 some institutional arrangement, more or less violent but in any event representative of a moral inertial frame
 196 whose momentous ends are to be resisted, thereby demonstrating the "force" of nonviolence in orchestrating
 197 the collapse of a violent structure that may have otherwise seemed omnipotent." (page 142) Indeed, this fact
 198 about nonviolence reflects on the value of knowledge altogether, as "people ought to value a piece of
 199 knowledge either for its capacity to describe in an interesting new way some part of the world or for its
 200 ability to detect the unethical or violent outcomes of some technology or technological product that has been
 201 discovered, for example, to be a potential carrier of global damage." (page 153)

202 In "its capacity to describe in an interesting way" violence and its mechanisms of propagation,
 203 *Understanding Violence* should be valued. The corruption of democracy and of religion, the use of language
 204 and fallacious reasoning in framing moral disputes and enforcing self-defeating social norms, the perversion
 205 of public sympathy and the tacit endorsement of systematic violence, all of this is exposed through colorful
 206 illustrations and sharp models that at once pack easily into the back of the mind, ready for future analyses.
 207 That *Understanding Violence* is able to bring all of this home to the reader with such inspired clarity is
 208 certain testimony to its potential for everyday application. Ultimately recommending a program to stem the
 209 flow of violence, motivated by the confidence symptomatic of increasing knowledge and facilitated by free
 210 access to information, *Understanding Violence* is a valuable contribution not only to the literature on the
 211 subject of violence, but to the possibility of a future with less of it, a shared future forged in mutual
 212 understanding rather than Hobbesian force. For anyone invested in engineering such a world, *Understanding*
 213 *Violence* is necessary reading. In the end, the future that we realize may depend on it.

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