The idea that if we are able to change things, to elect not to do so is also to determine what will happen in the world, is very old indeed. For obvious reasons, the idea is only employed when the things that happen are of some significance. The importance of the idea and its history stem from those cases where harm occurs which might have been averted or in which harm will occur unless it is averted. In such cases, many men have found it natural not only to blame those who could have prevented the harm, but did not do so, but also to think of such men as having brought the harm about, as being its cause.

I do not know when this idea first occurred. Plutarch makes use of it; John Bromyard, a fourteenth-century Chancellor of Cambridge, gives it most eloquent expression; and it is, of course, one of the main themes of Shakespeare's Measure for Measure. In modern times it has been associated most strongly with Marx, Engels, and Marxist thinkers. In their hands it has been used as a weapon in the controversy about "violence." Marxists have argued that deaths caused by the indifference and neglect of society or its rulers must be seen as being as much a part of human violence as the violent acts of revolutionaries.

In this paper I will defend two theses. The first is the idea that men are causally responsible for harm they could have prevented. The second is the view that such harm may properly be regarded as a form

I am greatly indebted to Ronald Dworkin with whom I have discussed most of the topics treated in this essay. Thanks are also due to Alan Ryan and to the Editors of Philosophy & Public Affairs for helpful comments.
of violence. It is characteristic of those I shall loosely call “Marxists” to combine both theses. I shall therefore, for convenience, call this combined view “the Marxist conception of violence.” This loose use of the term “Marxist” is, I think, justified on the grounds that the ideas with which I here associate it are to be found in the writings of both Marx and Engels, and because such ideas are characteristic of thinkers who either consider themselves to be, in some broad sense, followers of Marx, or who are called “Marxists” by their opponents.

In Part I of this essay I shall give a number of examples of the Marxist conception of violence. I have chosen so many examples for three reasons: for their intrinsic interest, because they illustrate both the force and the character of the Marxist view, and finally because their number and variety help to defend the view from the charge that it violates ordinary usage or “turns the language upside down.” Part II is devoted to a defense of the first thesis, and Part III to a defense of the second.

I

What I call “the Marxist conception of violence” is probably as old as any thinking on responsibility. Plutarch, for example, makes the point that a man who fails to protect another from a death he was able to prevent, is just as guilty of that man’s death as if he had wielded the sword himself. Talking of the revenge of the Triumvirs in his life of Mark Antony, Plutarch states: “At the end of all this bartering of one death for another, they [the Triumvirs] were just as guilty of the deaths of those whom they abandoned as of those whom they seized.”

In his guide for preachers, John Bromyard imagines the last judgment:

On the left, before the supreme Judge’s throne stand “the harsh lords, who plundered the people of God with grievous fines, amerce-ments and exactions, . . . the wicked ecclesiastics, who failed to nourish the poor with the goods of Christ . . . as they should have done. . . . Then the oppressed bring a fearful indictment against their oppressors. . . .” We hungered and thirsted and were afflicted

with cold and nakedness. And those robbers yonder gave not our own goods to us when we were in want, neither did they feed and clothe us out of them. But their hounds and horses and apes, the rich, the powerful, the abounding, the gluttons, the drunkards and their prostitutes they fed and clothed with them, and allowed us to languish in want. . . .

"O just God, mighty judge, the game was not fairly divided between them and us. Their satiety was our famine; their merriment was our wretchedness; their jousts and tournaments were our torments. . . . Their feasts, delectations, pomps, vanities, excesses and superfluities were our fastings, penalties, wants, calamities and spoliation. The love-ditties and laughter of their dances were our mockery, our groanings and remonstrations. They used to sing—'well enough! well enough!'—and we groaned, saying—'Woe to us! Woe to us!' . . ."  

The most compelling and coherent statement of the Marxist view occurs in Engels's book *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. It is worth quoting at some length:

If one individual inflicts a bodily injury upon another which leads to the death of the person attacked we call it manslaughter; on the other hand, if the attacker knows beforehand that the blow will be fatal we call it murder. Murder has also been committed if society places hundreds of workers in such a position that they inevitably come to premature and unnatural ends. Their death is as violent as if they had been stabbed or shot. Murder has been committed if thousands of workers have been deprived of the necessities of life or if they have been forced into a situation in which it is impossible for them to survive. Murder has been committed if the workers have been forced by the strong arm of the law to go on living under such conditions until death inevitably releases them. Murder has been committed if society knows perfectly well that thousands of workers cannot avoid being sacrificed so long as these conditions are allowed to continue. Murder of this sort is just as culpable as

The Marxist Conception of Violence

the murder committed by an individual. But if society murders a worker it is a treacherous stab in the back against which a worker cannot defend himself. At first sight it does not appear to be murder at all because responsibility for the death of the victim cannot be pinned on any individual assailant. Everyone is responsible and yet no one is responsible, because it appears as if the victim has died from natural causes. If a worker dies no one places the responsibility for his death on society, though some would realise that society has failed to take steps to prevent the victim from dying. But it is murder all the same.³

Christopher Caudwell, writing in 1938, makes use of a similar analysis of social relations:

Thus, just as much as in slave-owning society, bourgeois society turns out to be a society built on violent coercion of men by men, the more violent in that while the master must feed and protect his slave, whether he works or not, the bourgeois employer owes no obligation to the free labourer.⁴

Caudwell concludes, in agreement with Engels, that the absence of an individual assailant cannot affect responsibility:

The fact that one participates passively in bourgeois economy, that one does not oneself wield the bludgeon or fire the cannon, so far from being a defence really makes one's position more disgusting. . . .⁵

Ten years later Harold Orlans summed up his experience of conditions in an American mental hospital, in which he had worked as a conscientious objector during the Second World War, as follows:

It is in the murder by neglect of decrepit old men that I believe the closest analogy is to be found with the death camp murders. The

⁵. Ibid., p. 116.
asylum murders are passive; the Auschwitz murders active . . . but otherwise their logic is the same.6

Barrington Moore, Jr., warned that the death toll of the French revolutionary terror must be seen as a response to “the prevailing social order,” which “always grinds out its toll of unnecessary death year after year.” “It would be enlightening,” Moore continues, “to calculate the death rate of the ancien régime from such factors as preventable starvation and injustice.” Moore’s point is that “to dwell on the horrors of revolutionary violence while forgetting that of ‘normal’ times is merely partisan hypocrisy.”7

Marx himself gives repeated examples of the injury, shame, degradation, and death suffered every day by the working class and directly caused by the capitalist economy. In the chapter entitled “Machinery and Modern Industry” in volume I of Capital8 he spends most of his time pointing out the “antagonistic and murderous side” of modern manufacture. “One of the most shameful, the most dirty, and the worst paid kinds of labour” is that of the rag-sorters who “are the medium for the spread of small-pox and other infectious diseases and are themselves the first victims.” We learn that “it is impossible for a child to pass through the purgatory of a tile field without great moral degradation.” We are shown how the increase in the incidence of consumption among lace makers rose from one in forty-five in 1852 to one in eight in 1860, and that the “fearful increase in death from starvation during the last ten years in London runs parallel with the extension of machine-sewing.” “In one scutching mill at Kildinan, near Cork,” we are told, “there occurred between 1852 and 1856, six fatal accidents and sixty mutilations; every one of which might have been prevented by the simplest appliances, at the cost of a few shillings.” These mutilations “are of the most fearful nature. In many cases a quarter of the body is torn from the trunk, and either involves

death, or a future of wretched incapacity and suffering.” Marx’s emphasis is on the harm caused to human beings by their being forced to work in injurious conditions and by the failure of the employers or society generally to prevent suffering and death that could easily and at little cost be prevented. Whenever harm comes to workers in any way connected with their employment or the conditions of their lives that their work or lack of work forces upon them, the employers and society at large treat the harm as a natural calamity about which it is impossible to do anything. Marx believes that where human intervention could prevent this harm, then failure to prevent the harm must be seen as a cause:

Wherever there is a working day without restriction as to length, wherever there is night work and unrestricted waste of human life, there the slightest obstacle presented by the nature of the work to a change for the better is soon looked upon as an everlasting barrier erected by Nature. No poison kills vermin with more certainty than the Factory Act removes such everlasting barriers. No one made a greater outcry over “impossibilities” than our friends the earthenware manufacturers. In 1864 however they were brought under the Act, and within sixteen months every “impossibility” had vanished.9

Finally, I should like to cite the brief statement of an anonymous witness to a contemporary tragedy. Michael Elkins, broadcasting from Jerusalem for B.B.C. Radio News, reported that an eyewitness to the suicide squad massacre at Jerusalem airport said: “Don’t tell me anyone searched the suitcases of those men—whoever let those men on the plane is also guilty of murder.” I do not, of course, know whether this witness was a Marxist, even of any kind.

The Marxists emphasize both that the “normal” conditions of society are vicious and injurious and that responsibility rests as much with those who allow such states of affairs to continue as with those who brought them about. It will be obvious that all these examples depend at some point on recognition of the causal efficacy of omissions: workers are murdered because conditions in which they cannot survive are “allowed to continue,” one “participates passively” in violent coercion, decrepit old men are murdered “by neglect,” the

9. Ibid., p. 480.
ancien régime has a high death rate because of "preventable starvation and injustice," death and mutilation "might have been prevented by the simplest appliances at the cost of a few shillings." I shall next concentrate on the problem of how far we are causally responsible for harm we could have prevented, for if the Marxist claims about causal responsibility for such harm can be made out, then not only does their conception of violence move from rhetoric towards reality (because, of course, one of the essential elements of acts of violence is that there should be an agent), but a radical revision of our views about responsibility becomes imperative.

II

Jeremy Bentham called omissions which have consequences "negative actions," presumably because, like Engels, he was impressed by the fact that a failure to act can be as effective a way of doing something as an action traditionally understood. The great problem with omissions is to give an account of when a failure to act has consequences, and when it does not. Bentham obviously experienced this difficulty when he stated that "to strike is a positive act; not to strike on a certain occasion a negative one," but failed to give any account of how to distinguish the occasions on which not to strike is a negative action from those on which it is not.

Since Bentham's time, several attempts have been made to give an adequate account of when a failure to act has consequences, and when it does not. In what follows, I shall consider three of the most influential of such attempts and argue that their deficiencies point the way to a more satisfactory account of negative actions, an account, moreover, which is clearly the one upon which the Marxist conception of violence relies.

The crucial question is: In what circumstances is it appropriate to say that Y is a consequence of not doing X? Eric D'Arcy asks this question, and answers that Y is called a consequence of A's not doing X only when:

(1) Doing X is a standard way of preventing Y.

(2) A is in some way expected to do X.
(3) X is required of A in order that something such as Y should not happen.\(^\text{11}\)

D'Arcy makes it clear that A may be expected to do X, in the requisite sense of “expected,” if either, (a) “X is something that A usually does, or people usually do, in the situation in question,” or (b) “X is required of him by some rule with which he is expected to comply.” “This may of course be some moral rule, precept, or principle; but it will often be a non-moral rule.” The rule which requires X of A will often be, on D'Arcy's account, a catch-all Benthamite duty of beneficence which will cover “things which we should, or ought to do or not do to others, even when they are not required by virtue of office, voluntary undertaking, or special relationship.”

D'Arcy explains his set of conditions under which Y will be a consequence of A's not doing X, as follows:

A can . . . be held responsible for Y only to the extent that some relationship of cause and consequence exists between them; the only such relationship is that which exists by virtue of the connexion of each with X; and, by hypothesis, X connects them only to this extent, that X is enjoined upon A in order that something such as Y should not happen.\(^\text{12}\)

And he concludes that “in moral investigations, at least, the charge that A did not do X with the result that Y happened will . . . be successfully rebutted if it can be shown, not only that doing X was something which was not required of A: but even that it was not required of him in order that things such as Y might not happen.”\(^\text{13}\)

On D'Arcy's view, before we can say that A's failure to do X caused any result whatsoever, it must already be the case that X is expected or required of A. For if A is not already connected with X by some duty, then when X is not performed with the consequence that Y happens, A will not be connected to X, and therefore not to Y either.

D'Arcy has put his model together back-to-front, for his condition that “X is required of A in order that something such as Y should not

12. Ibid., p. 49.
13. Ibid., p. 50.
happen" would be pointless if it did not exploit our understanding of the causal connection between the failure of X and the occurrence of Y. D’Arcy’s own explication of the notion of beneficence confirms this. Beneficence it will be remembered, covers “things which we should, or ought to, do or not do to others.” One of D’Arcy’s examples (derived from Bentham) of the exercise of this duty is the following: “if a drunkard falls face downwards into a puddle, and is in danger of drowning, a bystander has a duty at least to lift his head a little to one side and so save him.” But our duty is not to go around lifting the heads of drunks, and so save them, our duty is to save them if we can. And we have this duty, because to fail to save someone we could save would be the death of him. It would not be the death of him because we have the duty; it would be the death of him because we fail to save him. His death results from our failure, whether we have a duty to save him or not (we might have a duty to kill this particular man and discharge it by failing to save him). It is not the existence of the duty that makes the death of the drunk a consequence of our failure to save him, rather it is the fact that unless we save him he will die that makes it our duty to save him.

If ever the duty of beneficence was owed, it was owed surely to the man who fell among thieves on the Jericho road. The thieves left him half dead, and he would perhaps have perished had the Samaritan followed the priest and the Levite and left him untended. The probable consequence of passing by on the other side would be the death of the man. To see this is to see a causal connection between the failure to tend the man and his death. And it is because we understand this connection that we see the point of the parable, that we realize why it is that the priest and the Levite ought to have tended the man. We do not need to postulate a duty of beneficence to explain how the neglect of the passersby might well have resulted in the man’s death, rather we need to understand the causal connection between neglect and death to see why anyone might be required to tend to him.

John Casey, in a recent discussion of this problem, notes that “the introduction of a statement which claims to give the cause of some event presupposes a pattern of normal expectations such that what will count as the cause of the event is, as it were, an intrusion into
the pattern of expectations."\textsuperscript{14} Casey goes on to state the conditions under which failure to act can have causal status in terms similar to D'Arcy's. "If a man does not do X, we cannot properly say that his not doing X is the cause of some result Y unless, in the normal course of events, he could have been expected to do X." Casey then argues that a man can be held "personally responsible" for something (and Casey means by this term of art roughly what Hart means by his term "moral liability-responsibility," namely, that the person is responsible in some way for which he may appropriately be praised or blamed) if (and only if):

(a) His actions (or omissions) are causally responsible for it.
(b) The outcome has some importance in terms of what he might be expected to do; in general, that is, in terms of a pattern of role responsibilities, in the context of which he acts.
(c) Normal conditions (i.e., no excusing conditions).\textsuperscript{15}

Casey notes that "the correctness of saying that condition (a) is satisfied rests on a rule of conversational propriety which is equivalent to the assertion of condition (b)." This note is necessary because, if "the introduction of a statement which claims to give the cause of some event presupposes a pattern of normal expectations such that what will count as the cause of the event is . . . an intrusion into the pattern of expectations," we must have some idea of what our normal expectations are. And if a failure to act is to be identified and given causal status, the normal conditions in the light of which it is a failure to act must be known. In knowing what a man is expected to do, we know the normal conditions; when a man fails to do what is expected of him, we can see that the failure is an intrusion into the pattern of normal expectations, and we are then able to say that certain events are the results of his failure. Furthermore, Casey believes that what he calls "a man's role" defines what sort of agent he is, and what are his responsibilities and obligations, prior to any particular case. This is, of course, sometimes true. The cultivation of his own

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 187.
garden is, if he does not employ a gardener, part of a man’s “role responsibilities” in the broad sense in which Casey uses the term. If the garden grows to seed and becomes possessed by things rank and gross in nature, the owner is responsible, and we know this prior to the deterioration of the garden, because we know who is responsible for its upkeep. But sometimes we know what a man’s responsibilities and obligations are only because we see that failure to act in a certain way will result in the occurrence of the sort of thing that we expect or require people to prevent. And where this is so, Casey’s notion of a man’s role will fail to provide a way of specifying what a man’s obligations are which is independent of the consequences of his not fulfilling them. In these cases it is not the fact that X is expected of a man that allows us to say that his not doing X makes him causally responsible for Y, but rather, the fact that we see him to be causally responsible for Y shows us that X was expected of him.

In their book Causation in the Law, Hart and Honore deal extensively with the question of the causal status of omissions. Their account relies heavily on some idea of normalcy. “When things go wrong and we ask the cause, we ask this on the assumption that the environment persists unchanged, and something has ‘made the difference’ between what normally happens in it and what has happened on this occasion.” On their account, when an omission has causal status, it has that status because it constitutes a departure from what normally happens.

What is taken as normal for the purpose of the distinction between cause and mere conditions is very often an artefact of human habit, custom and convention. This is so because men have discovered that nature is not only sometimes harmful if we intervene, but is also sometimes harmful unless we intervene, and have developed customary techniques, procedures and routines to counteract such harm. These have become a second ‘nature’ and so a second ‘norm.’ The effect of drought is regularly neutralized by government precautions in preserving water or food; disease is neutralized by inoculation; rain by the use of umbrellas. When such man-made

---

normal conditions are established, deviation from them will be regarded as exceptional and so rank as the cause of harm.

Hart and Honoré emphasize that deviation from customary techniques will rank as a cause, not because harm always results from such deviation, but because the "omitted precaution would have arrested the harm." This is certainly so, and it is an important point, but must the techniques have become customary, the procedures and routines normal, the method of prevention standard, before we can say that their omission caused some outcome?

At what point does the failure to neutralize the harmful effects of disease come to rank as the cause of those harmful effects? On the Hart-Honoré view this happens only when the practice of inoculation has become "a second 'nature' and so a second 'norm.'" Let us suppose that a vaccine against cancer is developed, tried, and tested at a university or by a drug manufacturer, that its discovery is made known by the firm which developed it, but that no one takes steps to make it generally available or to provide money for its mass production. Are we not entitled, indeed required, to conclude that a government, for example, or a drug company, which continues to allow people to die of cancer, when they could so easily be saved, is causally responsible for their deaths? And are we not entitled to say this even though no customary practice of vaccination against cancer has become second nature to the society in question? Hart and Honoré might reply that while vaccination against cancer has not become customary, the practice of inoculation is a standard method of prevention of disease, and that it is this practice which makes it possible to say that the failure to make available any new vaccine may involve causal responsibility for the continuing prevalence of the disease.

But we can push our inquiry further back and ask whether, when it had become clear that Jenner's vaccine was successful in preventing smallpox, it would have been necessary to wait until the practice of inoculation had become standard before it would be correct to cite failure to vaccinate as a cause, perhaps the most significant cause, of an epidemic.17

17. This is not perhaps the best example since it did not become clear that vaccination against smallpox was effective until the practice had become rea-
When in 1939 Howard Florey and his team concentrated and purified Fleming's antibiotic penicillin and demonstrated its curative properties, it would surely have been ludicrous to suggest that it was necessary to wait until its use had become standard before anyone was in a position to realize that any failure to put it into mass production would cost thousands of lives. Indeed, its use could not become standard until it was put into mass production, and there would be no reason to put it into mass production and thus make its use standard, if it were not already obvious that to fail to do so would cost lives.

When is it true to say that Y is a consequence of A's not doing X? The idea that a prerequisite of our saying that A's failure to do X caused Y is that X be somehow expected of A, which is employed by Hart and Honoré, D'Arcy and Casey, is probably correct for the majority of negative actions. The fact that someone normally does X, or that it is expected for some other reason that someone will do X, makes the nonoccurrence of X on a particular occasion something that calls for explanation. Or again, if A is required to do X, we have a reason for wanting to know if X has happened, and if it has not happened, for wondering why not. In either case, we first expect X of A, and whatever reason we have for so doing also shows why the nonoccurrence of X calls for an explanation at all, and indicates the direction in which to look for an answer. If we know it is the porter's job to raise the college flag at daybreak and at noon the college flagstaff is naked, we may want to know why the flag has not been raised, and the somnolence of the porter satisfies our curiosity. But the nakedness of flagpoles is unproblematic unless, because we know the porter's duties, we have some reason for expecting to see them clothed in flags. Where harm to human beings is concerned, however, our interest needs no special occasion. We are always interested in the causes of harm to ourselves and our fellow men.

The discussion of the theories of Hart and Honoré, D'Arcy, and Casey seems to indicate that the moment we realize that harm to human beings could be prevented, we are entitled to see the failure

sonably widespread. But with the modern practice of clinical trials we can easily imagine cases in which a completely new method of preventing or curing disease might be developed and proved effective before their use was at all general, let alone a second nature.
to prevent it as a cause of harm. As it stands, this statement seems too comprehensive in scope. We do not usually think of the man who fails to give money to save the victims of famine abroad as causing the deaths of some of the victims, even though we know that even a small donation would save lives. Still less, perhaps, do we think of society as guilty of massive carnage because it continues to allow the use of motor vehicles, although we know that were motor vehicles or most of them, to be banned, thousands of lives would be saved each year. That we do not usually speak of causes in these cases seems to show that there is something wrong with saying that the moment we realize that harm could be avoided, we are entitled to see the failure to prevent it as a cause of the harm. What appears to be wrong with the statement, and certainly the criticism that Hart and Honoré would level at it, is that it involves a confusion between causes and mere conditions. Wherever there is a possibility of preventing harm, its non-prevention is a necessary condition of the harm's occurring, but is something more required for a necessary condition to become a cause?

Hart and Honoré give a detailed account of just what more this is. They distinguish “mere conditions” from “causes” properly so called. Mere conditions are “just those [factors] which are present alike both in the case where such accidents occur and in the cases where they do not, and it is this consideration that leads us to reject them as the cause of the accident, even though it is true that without them the accident would not have occurred.” It is plain, of course, that to cite factors which are present both in the case of disaster and of normal functioning would explain nothing; such factors do not “make the difference” between disaster and normal functioning. Hart and Honoré emphasize that what is or is not normal functioning can be relative to the context of any given enquiry in two ways: either because some feature which pervades most contexts has been specifically excluded in a particular case, or because “in one and the same case . . . the distinction between cause and condition can be drawn in different ways. The cause of a great famine in India may be identified by the Indian peasant as the drought, but the World Food Authority may identify the Indian government’s failure to build up reserves as the cause and the drought as a mere condition.” Hart and Honoré suppose that what we want to know, when we ask for a causal explanation in
cases like this, is what made these people die of starvation when normally they would have lived? And the answer given is that one can say that what made this difference was the Indian government's failure to build up reserves—"an abnormal failure of a normal condition."

But what if normal functioning is always a disaster? Every year, just like clockwork, the poor and the jobless, the aged and the infirm, suffer terribly, and many of them die. What is the cause? The myopic view is that they die because they are poor and jobless, aged and infirm, that this is what distinguishes them from those who do not suffer, from those who do not die. But the "World Moral Authority" may identify the neglect of other members of society or of the government as the cause, and the other features as mere conditions. And surely the "World Moral Authority's" causal explanation is not upset by the discovery that this society normally neglects its weakest members, that there is no difference between what they did this year and what they always do, that caring for their needy is by no means an established procedure with them. Of course, Hart and Honoré can retreat to a second line of defense which their account prudently affords. They can say that, while this society may be callous, provision for the needy is none the less a well-established procedure among men, and it is this that allows us to cite neglect as the cause of suffering in the case; or in the case of the Indian famine, that building up reserves is a technique for preventing famine established at least since the time of Moses. This can only be a temporary line of defense, because there was a time when these precautions against harm were not the normal practice, and at that time, when men were wondering what was the cause of all the misery they saw about them, they did not ask themselves: why are these people suffering when normally they would not suffer? but, why are these people suffering when they could have been spared their suffering?

When we are seeking a causal explanation of the disasters that overtake human beings, we are often not seeking to explain why a disaster occurred on this occasion when normally it would not have occurred, but why it occurred on this occasion when it need not have done. Human life is often such a chapter of disasters that what we want explained is why these disasters happen when they could have been prevented. In these cases the question that interests us and
the question that must interest anyone who wishes to explain why
human beings so often needlessly come to grief, is not: *what made the
difference*, but, *what might have made the difference?* In the case of
the Indian famine the "mere" conditions will be the drought, the
failure of the crops, and so on; the cause will be the failure of the
Indian government to build up reserves or perhaps the failure of other
governments to send speedy and sufficient aid. When we are looking
for what might make the difference between harm's occurring and its
not occurring, anything that could have been done to prevent the harm
in question is a likely candidate for causal status.

So far, we have been interested in the question of when a failure
to act has consequences and when it doesn't, in when Y is a conse-
quence of A's failure to do X and when it isn't. Our interest has been
quite undiscriminating between the circumstances in which it is cor-
rect to say that Y is a *consequence* of A's actions or omissions and
those in which one can say that A *caused* Y or that A is *responsible* for
Y. But when we say that someone was the cause of harm to human
beings, we are singling him out as the author of the harm (or at least
as *one of the authors*), we are saying that he is responsible for it and
probably that he is to blame (or if, for some reason, we feel that the
harm was well-deserved, those responsible might be praised). Praise
or blame is usually appropriate where harm to human beings is know-
ingly caused. If we think that a particular method of preventing a
particular harm is for some reason ineligible, then we are unlikely to
blame people for not using it, and if it is the only way that the harm
could have been averted, we are unlikely to cite the failure to use the
method as a *cause* of the harm, even though the fact that the harm
occurred is, of course, a *consequence* of the failure to prevent it.

But what do these facts about the words we usually choose in dif-
f erent situations indicate about negative causation? If we think that a
possible method of preventing harm is ineligible, that its use is for
some reason completely out of the question, then we are unlikely to
see it as something that might have made the difference (or that made
the difference) between the harm's occurring and its not occurring.
We just do not think of it as something that "could have been done"
to avert the disaster.

But people are likely to differ crucially about just how viable options
of saving others are. Suffering people are likely to see the possibility of their sufferings being relieved as highly eligible, but those who would have to make sacrifices to bring relief are likely to think differently, especially if they have interests which would be permanently prejudiced by any change in the status quo.

Of course, if someone claims out of the blue that people who fail to do something that has hitherto been almost universally judged to be quite out of the question are causally responsible for the deaths of human beings, then some explanation at least is owed. But the legitimacy of claiming that a failure to exercise a particular option is causing death does not depend on our agreeing that the option should be, or should have been, exercised.

I have suggested that where Y involves harm to human beings, then Y will be a consequence of A's not doing X simply where X would have prevented Y and A could have done X. Where the doing of X is considered to be out of the question, we tend to act and talk as though the condition that A could have done X is not satisfied. People will differ as to just how "impossible" the doing of X really is, different principles and interests will pull in different directions: what is out of the question for A, B will do without a second thought. If a doctor believes that he must never deliberately take life and so refuses to perform an abortion, even though the mother will die if the abortion is not performed, he does not see himself as causing the mother's death, rather he believes himself to have no choice. It is significant that such a man is often described as following the dictates of the divine law, or of his conscience, "whatever the consequences," and that discussions of the problems raised by such dilemmas are discussions of whether absolutist moral principles which ignore consequences can be justified. The point is not that one has to be a consequentialist, but that the adoption of principles or values, or even ways of life or ways of organizing society, which makes the prevention of certain sorts of harm by certain means "out of the question," does not prevent the harm being a consequence of the maintenance of those principles or that way of life. If we decide that preventing particular harm by particular means is "out of the question," we are unlikely to talk as though the harm were a consequence of our failure to prevent it. But the occurrence of such harm is the price we pay for the mainte-
nance of our principles or of our way of life. Maybe it's worth it, maybe it isn't; that is another question. We can never rule out the possibility of hungry people in the third world, or even the victims of motor accidents in our own society claiming, with justice, that we are causally responsible for their plight because we decline to arrange things so that they may be preserved from harm.

To sum up, we must emphasize a distinction that has been implicit in the foregoing discussion: that between A causing Y by his failure to do X and his bringing about of Y by his failure to do X. That is, the distinction between negative causation and negative action. We can state formally the difference between the two as follows:

(a) Negative Causation: A's failure to do X caused Y where A could have done X and X would have prevented Y, and where either: X is somehow expected or required of A, or Y involves harm to human beings.

As many thinkers have observed, it seems inappropriate, even silly, to talk of a man being causally responsible for everything and anything he might have made different. There must be some reason for his interference, some point to it. There must be some feature of the situation that raises the issue of A's preventing Y by doing X. This feature, whatever it is, will make it appropriate to talk both of A's failing to do X, and of A's thereby causing Y. And this will be so even where we neither expect nor require A to do X, nor to prevent Y. Thus, either our expecting or requiring A to do X, or the fact that Y involves harm to human beings, are features of a situation that make it appropriate to talk of A's failure to prevent Y by doing X, as his causing Y. I don't intend this to be an exhaustive list of the conditions under which A's failure to do X can be said to cause Y. There may be situations in which quite different features may give reasons for interference and so make talk of causes appropriate.

(b) Negative Action: A's failure to do X with the result Y will make the bringing about of Y a negative action of A's, only where A's doing X would have prevented Y and A knew or ought reasonably to have known this, and where A could have done X and knew, or ought reasonably to have known, this.
We must here again note the distinction (pointed out by H.L.A. Hart)\textsuperscript{18} between causal responsibility and "moral liability-responsibility"; that is, between causing some outcome and being liable, accountable in some way that makes praise or blame appropriate. We are usually accountable for some outcome because we are causally responsible for it, but not simply because we are. It is only if the bringing about of \( Y \) is a negative action of \( A \)'s that his causal responsibility for \( Y \) will raise the question of whether or not he might also be morally responsible for \( Y \). And of course, whether \( A \) is morally responsible, whether he is to be held to account for bringing about \( Y \), will depend on a number of other considerations, as indeed it would if he had brought \( Y \) about by positive actions.

If the argument so far is right, it presents us with a choice between only two consistent views about negative causation. We can deny that anyone is ever responsible for things he could have prevented or changed. This would go against many of our intuitions and common-sense judgments, and would deny a whole realm of discourse long established and firmly entrenched both in our practice and in our habits of speech. The second alternative will be even less attractive to many, for if we admit the concept of negative causation, if we allow that anyone is ever responsible for something he could have prevented or changed, then we must accept a drastic revision of our views about agency and responsibility.

In this section I have concentrated on showing that the Marxist conception of violence depends upon some theory of negative action. I have attempted to show that the accepted views about the causal efficacy of omissions are inadequate and to provide a consistent theory which not only accounts for the cases covered by the accepted view, but has the additional merit of explaining and underpinning the claims that Marxists and others wish to make about our responsibility for what happens in the world. This theory shows that the claims of the Marxists are not merely empty rhetoric, but are based on a solid and defensible theory of action.

I will conclude by trying very briefly to indicate the extent to which

we are, I believe, morally responsible for our negative actions, and so make clearer why the theory of negative action developed in this section forces on us a radical revision of our views about responsibility.

If we take what is possibly the most generally recognized duty, that of refraining from killing, injuring or otherwise inflicting suffering on our fellow men, we see that this duty has both a positive and a negative form. We have the duty not to injure anyone by performing harmful actions we could avoid. This is the active voice of the duty which may be expressed in passive voice as the duty not to injure anyone by failing to perform actions which we could perform and which, if performed, would prevent the injury from occurring. If we sometimes take comfort from the reflection that no man is an island, we may sometimes also ponder just how, or how far, we are involved in mankind. If we accept the prohibition against killing or injuring other people, the theory of negative actions developed in this section shows us that, whereas we may have thought that whatever we do to allay the sufferings of others is mere charity, we are in most cases bound to help by the strongest of obligations. What possible basis could there be for distinguishing between active and passive forms of the duty not to injure others on moral, or any other grounds, that would make one form of the duty less binding than the other? If we have a duty not to kill others, it would be strange indeed if the duty not to kill by positive actions was somehow stronger than the duty not to kill by negative actions. I do not see how we can escape the conclusion that in whatever sense we are morally responsible for our positive actions, in that same sense we are morally responsible for our negative actions. And the corollary of this is, of course, that whatever considerations mitigate our moral responsibility for particular positive acts, considerations of equal moral force are needed to mitigate our responsibility for negative acts with the same consequences.

The morality to which our equal responsibility for positive and negative acts with the same consequences would commit us is clearly a very demanding one, but I think equally clearly a more moral one than is current. It would oblige us to work actively and, in the present state of the world, unremittingly for the relief and prevention of suffering. Whether or not all of us whose negative actions make us responsible for harm to others should be blamed, I am not sure. One
should not perhaps blame people too severely for not rising much above the standards of their time. But whether or not we choose to blame people for all the harmful consequences of their negative actions, does not affect the question of their blameworthiness, and it does not affect their moral responsibility for their actions. We might have to accept for some while a discrepancy between most people's practice and the standards set by this morality.19 I am sure, however, that we should recognize that this is a morality towards which we ought to work, and one of the ways to do this is to make people aware of what they are doing.

The view that to bring about harmful consequences through negative actions is every bit as bad as to do so through positive actions, has of course been challenged, particularly in the debates about the moral difference between killing and letting die. To defend this view against all the attacks that have been or might be leveled against it and to show how it would apply to some of the most controversial or paradoxical cases would require more space than I have here, and is therefore a task for another day.20 We must now return to the question of violence. If the claims that the Marxists make about violence can be made out, it looks as though those who condemn violence are committed to oppose more than they imagine. I will now try to show that this is so.

III

The Marxists are pointing out that much of the harm that has been thought to be part of the natural hazards of life is not at all natural, and that if we ask why this harm is occurring when it might have been prevented, we will find that it is in fact attributable to the machinations of men. Far from being the result of the operation of gratuitous and impersonal forces, much harm must be seen as the work of assignable agents. Now what is the justification for calling the infliction of such harm "violence"? Well, what is the objection?

The argument against the Marxist view goes roughly like this: The

19. This way of dealing charitably with the problem of blame I owe to Jonathan Glover.
Marxists are attempting to call any harm caused by men to one another “violence,” but violence is just one of the ways of doing harm—not all of them. Moreover, the Marxist view would obscure or collapse the traditional distinction between violence and nonviolence. We can, and do, tell the difference between clubbing a man to death and peacefully enjoying a good meal while he starves to death outside, or between burning down a man’s house and evicting him. The distinction between violent and nonviolent ways of doing things is clear and useful for evaluating actions, and it allows us to try to understand and explain just what it is about violence that makes it such a fearful thing, so fearful a thing, indeed, that many men have been led to renounce violence absolutely (or at least as much as is convenient). The maintenance of the violent-nonviolent distinction, so far from begging any questions, as Marxists sometimes argue, leaves open all questions as to whether violent means are, for example, better or worse than nonviolent means. The distinction merely allows us to reserve the name of violence for those fearful acts upon which the traditional abhorrence of violence is founded.

This objection to the Marxist view is twofold. The claim is first that the Marxists simply use the concept of violence inappropriately, that they stretch its meaning beyond the breaking point and use it in a way which ignores distinctions that are ordinarily made. The second objection is more subtle. It is that the Marxists wish to claim that the distinction between positive and negative ways of contributing to someone else’s injury is a morally insignificant distinction, and that they support the point by applying the word violence to both types of case. The objection, then, is that to apply the word violence to both types of case is self-defeating, for it concedes the moral importance of the distinction, in relying on the rhetorical force the word violence has because it standardly describes a certain kind of positive direct action.

To take the second point first: it is, of course, true that violence gets its rhetorical force from the sorts of cases which spring to mind when the word is mentioned. But just what are the cases from which violence derives its rhetorical potency? They are, surely, the cases which come closest to what we might call the rape, murder, fire, and sword paradigm, the terrible cases of violent infliction of death or serious injury. Of course, sack and pillage are not exactly everyday
events, and even murder and grievous bodily harm make up only a small proportion of human violence. Much, perhaps most, of the violence which the anti-Marxists are willing to recognize is of a minor, even trivial nature; e.g., petty assaults, punch-ups outside bars, incidents in football crowds and on the field, and scuffles in demonstrations, breakings of windows and minor damage to property. Clearly the rhetorical force of "violence" does not derive from these! And the Marxists do not rely on the fact that violence standardly describes certain types of positive direct action. They do rely on violence conjuring up pictures of tragic death, mutilation, or other serious injury. But there seems to be no compelling reason why these should have been inflicted only by positive direct rather than negative or indirect actions. The point is that it would be absurd to suppose that the moral importance of the distinction between acts of violence and acts which do not involve violence consists solely or even principally in their being positive rather than negative. Of course, the Marxists are relying on the rhetorical force the word violence has because of the cases with which it is standardly associated, but what is it about these cases which they rely on? Not, certainly, on the trivial contingency that they involve positive actions, but surely on the vital fact that they involve serious injury attributable to assignable agents.

So, the Marxist conception of violence cannot be regarded as self-defeating. It does not concede the moral importance of a distinction it wishes to demolish when it makes use of the rhetorical force of the word violence, nor does it rely on that distinction. Rather, the Marxists rely on the fact that the word violence derives its rhetorical force from its conjuring up pictures of the fearful injuries inflicted on men by men, and the Marxists claim that in this respect the cases they wish to call violence are isomorphic with those the anti-Marxists recognize.

Now, what of the claim that, whether or not the Marxist conception of violence is self-defeating, it none the less involves a mistake, the simple conceptual error of confusing violent methods of harming people with methods which are not violent? But how, in fact, do we distinguish violent methods from those which are not violent, and acts of violence from acts that are not acts of violence? The first thing to note is that there is an important difference between these two ways of posing the distinction. "Violent" is an adjective, and a violent act
an act appropriately qualified by that adjective. An act of violence, on the other hand, is an act belonging to a particular category or class of actions not coextensive with violent acts.

We can state the distinction between violent acts and acts of violence in this way: Almost any action a human being can perform can be performed violently. Mr. Wilson slicing viciously into a bunker, or Mr. Gladstone denuding the countryside of trees, are both performing violent acts. Even a cup of tea may be stirred violently. For those who dislike the circularity of saying that a violent act is an act performed violently, we can say simply that a violent act is any act appropriately characterized by the following sorts of words taken from the "violence" entry in Roget's Thesaurus: "inclemency, vehemence, might, impetuosity, boisterousness, turbulence, bluster, uproar, riot, row, rumpus, fury, brute force, outrage, shock, explosion. . ." The considerations which lead us to classify acts as acts of violence are clearly of a different sort. When trying, for example, to assess the prevalence and the causes of violence in human affairs we are clearly not concerned with a well-hit golf ball; we might say that what concerns us here is what is left when we subtract a violent act from an act of violence. It is important to note that the words "violent" and "violence" and the phrases "act of violence" and "violent act" are often used indiscriminately between the two senses I have distinguished. In each case, the context must make clear whether the descriptive or classificatory sense of the term is intended.

What principles then determine the classification of acts as acts of violence for those who regard the Marxist view as conceptually confused?

To define with any sort of clarity the concept of violence upon which the anti-Marxists rely is no easy matter. Clearly they have in mind the rape, murder, fire and sword paradigm which involves the sudden forceful, and perhaps unexpected, infliction of painful physical injury upon an unwilling victim. Nowadays terrorists who machine-gun or bomb their victims are the classic case. But if the terrorists poison the water supply or gas their victims while they sleep, or brick them up in their houses to die of starvation or suffocation, we would not, I think, regard it as mistaken or confused if people continued to speak of "terrorist violence." And the terrorists could hardly
claim to have renounced violence if they adopted such methods. If it is not inapposite to talk of violence in these cases, the door is already open to the Marxists.

We were told recently that children in Belfast adopt the following tactic against British soldiers.21 Here is one of the children describing the method: "That's the street right? These are the lamp-posts and that's the Army Land-Rover coming up the street. You tie your cheese-wire between two of the lamp-posts about six feet up. There's always a soldier standing on the back of the jeep; even with the search lights he can't see the wire in the dark. It's just at the right height to catch his throat." No violent act on the part of the child, but clearly an act of violence. So long as such tactics are employed no one would call Belfast a violence-free city.

If a man is stabbed to death, we do not doubt that he has been the victim of a violent assault. Would we have to alter our judgment if we later learn that the stiletto slid between his ribs as easily as you please? This stiletto point is the thin end of the wedge. For if we are interested in the question of the prevalence of violence in human affairs, or in comparing the scale of violence in different societies, in different eras, or in assessing the violence of opposing factions, it would be absurd to ignore or exclude methods men find of killing or injuring their fellows that do not happen to involve vigorous direct actions.

If, for example, instead of bombs and guns, poison, nerve gas, and exposure to radiation became standard ways of eliminating our fellow men, we would not, I think, be inclined to claim that men had become less violent in their dealings with each other even though such methods do not involve physical assault or violent actions of any kind. If we are interested in the question of whether a particular society does or does not use violence as a method of settling differences or resolving disputes, we would certainly not ignore the fact that the society eliminated an opposition group or an unpopular minority by herding them into ghettos where they were left to die of starvation or disease. While such things go on, the claim that mankind is becoming less violent will be viewed with skepticism.

The questions that interest us about violence—questions about its prevalence, its causes, its prevention, questions about when it should be used and why, about whether or not it has been used in particular cases, whether it is on the increase, whether some societies or periods are or were more violent than others—would be trivial questions if all that they are about is whether or not actions of a particular description are used. Trivial also because much of our interest in these questions stems from our concern to solve the problem of violence, to minimize its use or even remove it entirely from human affairs, and this we might succeed in doing and yet leave intact all the features of the problem of violence that make a solution desirable. Death, injury and suffering might be just as common as before, only the characteristic complex of actions by which they are inflicted would have changed.

Surely our interest in all these questions about violence reflects a concern with the phenomenon of men inflicting injury, suffering, or death on one another? We are not so much interested in the particular methods men use to do this, or in the look, the physical character of the actions they use. We are interested in violence because it is a particular kind of activity—the activity in which men cause each other injury and suffering.

The point of contention between the Marxists and those who object to their conception of violence concerns what feature is constitutive of the concept. The Marxists claim that violence is the phenomenon of men inflicting injury on one another. The anti-Marxists might concede that this is part of the concept, but would insist that it is a necessary condition that those injuries be inflicted by vigorous, direct action. The question then arises as to whether the Marxists and their opponents are pointing to different forms of the same activity or to different activities. Are they using different conceptions of the same concept or different concepts? This question forces us to answer the question with which we started: what is the justification for calling the infliction of harm by negative actions “violence”?

We have seen that a distinction must be made in our use of the terms violent and violence between what I have called the purely descriptive use of violence and its classificatory sense. I have shown that the classificatory sense of violence cannot be made parasitic on the descriptive sense without trivializing all the questions that most
interest us. The justification for calling the infliction of harm by negative actions "violence" is that when we classify an act as an act of violence we are saying that it is part of a single phenomenon, that all men who use violence are involved, in some sense, in the same activity. If we ask what this activity is, the answer that forces itself upon us is that it must be the infliction of injury or suffering upon others. It is this that makes the Marxist conception of violence one conception of the same concept which captures the rape, murder, fire, and sword paradigm.

For Thomas Hobbes, the first and fundamental reason for establishing the state was to protect men from the disasters of the war of every man against every man. Man's natural propensity to violence caused the worst features of this war, which were "continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." The Marxists did not need to create a fictional state of nature to see men in this condition, they just looked around. At the sight of men causing others to lead lives in fear and danger, poor, nasty, brutish and short, the Marxists naturally spoke of violence, for they were faced with an activity of essentially the same kind as that which Hobbes most feared. For Hobbes the remedy was the social contract; for the Marxists, the social revolution.

I have been concerned in this section to defend a particular use of a particular word against the charge that it is conceptually confused, self-defeating and likely to lead to ambiguity and equivocation. Defense, I think, must be the best form of attack, for it shows a way to turn the tables on this form of criticism and argue that it, in turn, is based on a confusion—that of failing to distinguish acts of violence and violent acts. One would then say that it is this confusion that has tempted a number of philosophers to criticize certain definitions of violence on the grounds that they class actions as acts of violence which do not involve violent acts.

Amidst all this confusion it would be very easy to miss the point, which is, surely, that the differences between the followers of what I have called the Marxist conception of violence and their critics are

not due to confusion of any kind. The Marxists are not unaware of the many different sorts of harm that human beings can suffer, nor are their critics necessarily ignorant of the fact that vigorous direct action is not a sufficient condition of violence. The dispute between Marxists and their opponents over the definition of violence is not to be explained by reference to the conceptual confusion of the protagonists.

The extreme intractability of the controversy over this definition is, of course, in part the result of the unwillingness of the various parties to renounce the right to use one of the most powerful terms of political rhetoric. But there are other things at stake. When we remember that violence is commonly thought of as a problem of world proportions requiring urgent solution, we uncover another motive for defining violence in a particular way. For to define violence is, in a sense, to determine the scope of this problem. In disputes over which features are constitutive of the concept of violence both political and philosophical motives play a part, and it may be that there is no final answer, no definitive analysis. Different features of the phenomenon of violence will loom larger as the form of the phenomenon varies, or as the political perspective of the theorists changes. Where muggings and violent demonstrations are the fear and the theorists speak for the fearful, vigorous direct actions will seem the most important features of violence. Where the streets are quiet, but people who could be saved are left to die of neglect or cold or hunger, or are crippled or killed by their living or working conditions, a different group of people may suffer, and other theorists may see their suffering as attributable to human agency, and so class it as part of man's violence to man.

If I am right that when we talk of violence we are not simply interested in the means whereby particular harm is inflicted, but rather in some characteristic activity or phenomenon, then there may be different distinctive features which are the hallmark of this activity, and reasonable men may differ as to what those features are. In this paper I have shown that the Marxist conception of violence isolates a feature of violence which, on any account must be central, and which is shared by the paradigm cases. I have argued
that this conception in fact captures the activity which is constitutive of the concept of violence. About this, of course, there may be argument, but I believe that I have said enough to establish the Marxist conception of violence, at the very least, as one coherent conception of violence.