Violence has always been a much debated concept in the history of philosophy, but in the course of the twentieth century a radicalization has taken place in the philosophical reflection on violence. This radicalization includes the idea that philosophical reflection is in itself a violent act. In the view of Emmanuel Levinas all rational activity as such is a violent appropriation of objects and themes. He recognizes violent forces on a transcendental level of perception and knowledge. Jacques Derrida has labelled this as 'transcendental violence'. On the one hand Derrida criticizes several aspects of Levinas' approach, but on the other hand he radicalizes this approach by discussing an even more primordial form of violence. In this article I shall first analyze what exactly their views on violence consist of (§ 1 and 2). Then a critical discussion of these approaches will follow, which will show, on the one hand, that the approaches of Levinas and Derrida are so radical that they become contradictory. One of their mistakes is that they see violence as a necessary result of finitude (§ 3). On the other hand, it will also be shown that the concept of violence cannot be discussed without reflection on its functioning on a transcendental level (§ 4).

I. Levinas: Intentionality and Violence

In his article 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite', Levinas makes a distinction between two ways of philosophical thinking, two approaches of truth: autonomy and heteronomy. In the truth of heteronomy the philosopher relates to a reality that is absolutely other; in autonomy truth means the approval of a proposition. The autonomy of the thinker expresses itself in truth. The philosophy of autonomy, in Levinas’ view, is a conquest of being by man, which takes place by a reduction of the other to the same:
The conquest of being by man through history—that is the formula to which freedom, autonomy, the reduction of the Other to the Same, comes down to.¹

Levinas adds that the preference of western philosophy usually has been on the side of autonomy.² The understanding of an object takes place through the mediation of a neutral third term. The other is classified under a general concept. This reduction of the other to the same is not innocent, because here . . .

. . . all power starts. The surrender of exterior things to human liberty through their generality does not only mean, in all innocence, their comprehension, but also their taking in hand, their domestication, their possession. […] Reason that reduces the other is an appropriation and a power.³

Reduction, possession and appropriation are the key terms in Levinas’ view of knowledge and reason. In his two early short books, *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*, he discusses this appropriation in terms of light. Light, according to Levinas, is the space between subject and object. He describes the subject as independent and separated from being. The phenomena appear to the subject within a world that is the subject’s world. All phenomena can be reduced to the subject, which is intentionally directed to the objects that appear for it, within the light of perception and reason:

The interval of space given by light is instantaneously absorbed by light. Light is that through which something is other than myself, but already as if it came from me.⁴

Property constitutes the world: through the light the world is given and apprehended. […] Illuminated space is completely collected around a mind which possesses it. […] There is a totality because it relates to an inwardness in the light.⁵

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