# Political Correctness between Wise Stoicism and Violent Hypocrisy

**Lorenzo Magnani**

Department of Humanities, Philosophy Section and Computational Philosophy Laboratory,
University of Pavia, 27100 Pavia, Italy; lmagnani@unipv.it

**Abstract:** This article aims at commenting in a novel way on the concept of political correctness, by showing that, even if adopting a politically-correct behavior aims at promoting a precise moral outcome, violence can be still perpetrated, despite good intentions. To afford in a novel way the problem of political correctness, I will adopt a theoretical strategy that adheres to moral stoicism, the problem of "silence", the "fascist state of the mind" and the concept of "overmorality", which I have introduced in my book *Understanding Violence. The Intertwining of Morality, Religion, and Violence: A Philosophical Stance* (Springer: Heidelberg/Berlin, Germany, 2011). I will demonstrate that political correctness certainly obeys the stoic moral rule, which teaches us that we have to diminish conflicts and, so, the potential for derived violence, by avoiding to pronounce words and expressions that can be offensive and so conflict making. Unfortunately, political correctness often increases the so-called already widespread overmorality, typical of our era, and postulates too many minor moral values (or rights) to be attributed to individuals and groups, which must be respected. Therefore, engaging in political correctness obscures more serious issues regarding social, political and economic life, committing a sin of abstractness and idealization. At the same time, by discouraging the use of words and expressions, the intrinsic overmoralization at work creates potential new conflicts and potential derived violence.

**Keywords:** political correctness; stoicism; hypocrisy

## 1. "The Trio of Chubby Girls Nearly Olympic Miracle"

Simply following Wikipedia, we can find an acceptable definition of political correctness: it refers to language, policies or measures that are intended not to offend or disadvantage any particular group of people or minorities in society (cf. also [1–3]).[1] Recently, in Western society (especially in the U.S., but now also, insistently, in the EU) politics, mass media and some academic circles, a kind of obsessive and prudish reference to the need of a politically-correct behavior grew beyond any expectation, referring for example to a kind of multiculturalist cult, feminism, equality of cultures, affirmative action, etc., and favoring self-victimization, always seen as related to fundamental moral values to be implemented to the aim of the progress of civilization and freedom. Usually, political correctness is proposed by some, sometimes aggressive, elitist small groups formed by important politicians, journalists, rich and famous actors and major protagonists of mass-media, and it is occasionally adopted, reproduced and sometimes magnified in social networks (obsessively) and in academia and higher education (pedantically).

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[1] In the media, the term can be used as a pejorative, implying that these policies are always excessive. It is well known that in October 1990, the New York Times article by Richard Bernstein promoted a strong popularization of the term.

Indeed, today, political correctness undoubtedly embeds a controversial connotation because some imprecise and inconsistent norms have been extensively applied in educational settings, especially in the academic environment. Since the 1990s, this caused the reaction of several authors, who discussed the radical (sometimes blind) enforcement of politically-correct measures in high schools and colleges of the United States and Canada (cf. [4–6]). Derived moral agendas are often considered by a large part of public opinion arbitrary, abstract, hypocritical and unjustified challenges to the standard semantics of natural languages of various groups.

Here is a simple sad example of the excessive use of political correctness aiming at protecting the dignity of women: in August 2016, a sport journalist of an Italian national newspaper has been (unbelievably) fired because of his article "Il Trio delle cicciottelle sfiora il miracolo olimpico" ("The trio of chubby girls nearly an Olympic miracle"), which was considered offensive against women.

I am convinced that to increase knowledge about the problem of political correctness, it is important to exploit three central topics I also discussed in my book *Understanding Violence. The Intertwining of Morality, Religion, and Violence: A Philosophical Stance* [7]:

(1)   the relationship between morality and violence, also linked to the so-called "fascist state of the mind";
(2)   the concept of overmorality;
(3)   the stoic doctrine of indifference.

## 2. Political Correctness between Morality and Violence

I have said that political correctness refers to language, policies or measures that are intended not to offend or disadvantage any particular group of people in society. As already highlighted by [8], political correctness is a "process of making judgments from the vantage point of a particular ideology", and it usually represents a strong moral commitment that also carries a halo of special modernity and a high level of civilization. Let us see the problem of political correctness in light of some aspects of stoic moral philosophy.

In light of the stoic tradition, we can say that there are preferable moralities (for example, for me and for other intellectual people). Just to make an example, I prefer life imprisonment to the death penalty, because I see a weaker violence in it: yet, it is clear that the success of such a preference depends on the struggle in the objective life of groups and their cultures and on the fact that the option I endorse is the established one in my legal framework (sadly, I often notice that the established habit is the most violent one). I am almost sure that many people here in Northern Italy, who actively militate in the "Lega Nord" (Northern League), basically embedded in a xenophobic state of mind, consider the death penalty to be less violent than life imprisonment (because, I guess, from their own inner "moral" perspective, they think that killing a killer diminishes the global violence of a society and that it is the "just" punishment).

Is perceiving injustice "natural"? Obviously, I do not think so. Perceiving injustice is very variable: do you not see how different the feeling of injustice is in different people? I like capitalistic social-democracies, and I am very surprised to see how many people do not perceive at all the global injustice of this horrible (at least for me) neo-con/neoliberal capitalism. Therefore, perceiving injustices consists of a practice heavily affected by cultural and axiological factors: here in Italy, there are people who lost their jobs or their private enterprise/business, and who became poor (or poorer), because of neoliberal policies, but they still morally think neoliberalism is the best and do not perceive its atrocious outcomes like I do. I think they are incoherent and ignorant, but many of them surely think I am a stupid dreamer and/or a horrible and verbally violent member of a presumptuous intellectual elite oriented towards social democracies! I like equality, but I do not have any reason to think that equality is something special. I am aware that, if we want to impose and establish equality, we have to perform what Walter Benjamin calls a law-making violent act (consider for example, the French revolution). Indeed, many people and groups do not like equality and do not think equality is

a positive aspect of a strong morality, even now in the 21st Century: they consequently feel constantly violated by the modern civil idea of "égalité". Therefore, why think that equality is void of any relationship with violence? The egalitarian groups usually hate non-egalitarians and vice versa, as I think they are both convinced they are dealing with a "pure/good morality" (which justifies any related violence, thanks to the moral bubble they are in).[2]

I always endorsed political correctness as a very progressive moral commitment: this conviction does not have to obliterate the fact that it can be a carrier of violence under many perspectives, as I will try to illustrate in the following parts of this article. As a philosopher, adopting a naturalistic perspective, what I want to avoid is establishing a final and stable truth about political correctness, that is a dogmatic and "locked" moral-philosophical perspective about "what is political correctness?" Of course, I also want to avoid answering questions like "how can we properly apply political correctness". Answering these questions inside philosophy seems to me the perpetration of a high degree of intellectual violence, disrespecting the banality and, so to say, moral dignity of trivial simple human behaviors. These behaviors, when related to the respect of "correctness", might perpetrate a violence that can be clearly empirically seen: a violence that can consists in abstractly, without a serious reason, negating diversity or even unaware of harming people in various ways.[3]

However, the reader must not misunderstand me! When I say I want to provide a "moral dignity" to human behavior, I am referring to the fact that we have to respect it, as a human behavior that cannot be neutralized with an abstract, narcissistic, emancipating, conceptual philosophical theory (too "low cost", from both the intellectual and emotional point of view). This would be a kind of violence, a merely abstract terminator machine, "written in more or less complicated books and articles", which just fakes a perverse atmosphere of an almost empty moral "militancy". In short, I cannot compose a list in which I distinguish between good and bad politically-correct behaviors. In this article, I would simply like to increase philosophical and cognitive knowledge on political correctness' multiple aspects, to show how it is de facto intertwined with violence and how much violence is hidden, and invisibly or unintentionally performed, when derived from that supposed-to-be-always-noble moral commitment. In a few words, I already remarked along almost all of the pages of my book that I have quoted above that I think it is mandatory, in our times, to stress the other face of (presupposed) good things and beliefs. Gogol, for example, was perfectly aware of the fact that knowledge, inclination and sensitivity to good is always inextricably bound to knowledge, inclination and sensitivity to evil.

As an individual, I have of course my own (evolving) morality, but, as I already said, I keep it as something very particular that I do not intend to "teach" to anyone. Here are some elements of what I consider to be my morality: (1) I do not like the overmorality (cf. Section 4 below) that I witness everywhere; (2) in my behavior, I always try to "lower emotions", to avoid a priori conflicting situations where morally-dependent conflicts (and conflicts of other cultural perspectives) can arise; (3) I try to treat people according to their "nature", like Zeno of Citium says: "The goal of life is living in agreement with nature"; (4) I do not like revenge, but I try to transform it, when it is possible of

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[2]   Being constitutively and easily unaware of our errors is very often intertwined with the self-conviction that we are not at all violent and aggressive, but just moral, in the argumentation we perform (and in our eventual related actions). A moral bubble, in which an agent is "trapped", refers to the fact that we only see the moral side of our actions and not the possible violent effects. I have introduced and explained this concept in [7], Chapter Three.

[3]   For example, political correctness could lead to a patronization of people's behavior from a philosophical point of view, which reflects the same effect of the blind enforcement of political correctness norms that, as already pointed out by Žižek, are "all the more humiliating inasmuch as they are masked as benevolence" [9]. Indeed, several studies pointed out how blind politically-correct measures provided much distress in some closed communities (such as universities, high schools, workplaces) than the previous enactment of less strict norms of behavior. Just to mention two cases, [10] testified how, in his clinical work as a family systems therapist, he had repeatedly encountered experiences of social distress in clients who attempted to deal with strong political correctness measures, and a study conducted by [11] reported how the pressure to appear politically correct in educational settings can create discrepancies between public behavior and private attitudes, generating phenomena of hypocritical acceptance of norms rather than multicultural comprehension.

course (better to avoid revenge if it involves too violent outcomes) into a moderate, non-retaliatory, didactic reaction (if this is not possible or feasible, I simply give up). As you can easily see, this is not a morality in the common sense of the term (like my inner Catholic morality, which I learned when I was a child and, that anyway, I still love and try to follow); it is something more personal and also characterized by meta-moral aspects (individual, customized to me and through my history), related to a possible good construction of myself.

As a researcher in moral philosophy, I am convinced that there is a spontaneous generation of violence through morality. As an example, imagine that you are a good stoic (as I would like to be), and you are morally intelligent because you prefer to prevent violence. Other people that entertain relationships with you, and that instead prefer and like the behavior you perceive as "violent", can perceive "you" as violent because you prefer to violently repress your passions and emotions like stoicism requires! Moreover, we must not forget that people often "like" violence (emotionally or, more rationally, because they are morally convinced of its "moral" function: punishment, purification, revenge, edification, etc.), and it is difficult to dissuade them. When we approach violent people to persuade them about the badness of their behavior, we are in turn very often considered as non-violently violent![4]

Indeed, the violent dimension of morality is embedded in the extent that is self-blind or, as I already mentioned in previous works, auto-immune [12,13]. The more self-righteous a moral norm is felt by the individuals who apply it, the less they will notice its intrinsic violence. For strict politically-correct measures, the danger of self-blindness is doubled. On the one hand, people who enact these measures may not be aware of the strong moral position they are enforcing (and so, of its violent dimension). On the other hand, as [9] pointed out, they may hardly be aware of the fact that using new forms of labels in order to substitute blunt and cruel forms, they could still highlight the same difference they are trying to avoid noticing (as replacing the word "fat" or "stupid" with "weight challenged" and "mentally challenged" strongly focus the attention on the lacks/problems that people try to ignore), becoming even more humiliating and aggressive in the eyes of the victims.

I have said above that the dimension of wisdom (stoics, etc.) is a good morality; I can now clearly add that it is always related to an aristocratic attitude. From the moral point of view, political correctness is stoic because it aims at weakening risky conflicts, violence, oppression, etc., which derive for instance from some verbal expressions. For example, some expressions originate in those cases in which humans perform an act of elimination of proper names ("kikes" for Jews, "gooks" for Vietnamese; for two decades, the former Italian prime minister has made an annoying, but efficacious and aggressive use of the word "communist" to indicate simply democratic or Christian-democratic people, and in turn, he has been nicknamed by his adversaries as "the dwarf" for his short size, in a bitter escalation of calling each other names). Thus, comprehending the limitation of the enforcement of blind political correctness, I agree with [14] when he declares that "politically correct solutions can likely be imprecise, inconsistent, pragmatic, logically indefensible. That does not make them less ethical". Therefore, in the following section, I will analyze the so-called "fascist state of the mind", showing those behaviors (mainly verbal) that surely political correctness can beneficially contrast.

## 3. Extreme Absence of Political Correctness: Intellectual Genocide

In that psychological state, the psychoanalyst Bollas [15] called the "fascist state of the mind"[5] verbal attack very often creates a more or less unconscious "sense of murdering". In the worst cases, various kinds of so-called fallacious arguments are used, also to provide those symptoms I personally consider real "alarms" through which it is possible to abduce the emergence of the fascist state of

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4    On this interplay of violent/non-violent, cf. also [7], Chapter Four, Section "Nonviolent Moral Axiologies, Pacifism, and Violence".

5    For a treatment of this subject in the perspective of the relationship between morality and violence, see my [7], Chapter 5.

mind: Bollas lists some of the main efficacious cases, which he eloquently considers as the tools for a possible intellectual genocide, which is considered as a real, new and important "category of crime". A subset of these is the group of rhetorical methods that substantiate what he calls the committive genocide:[6]

(1)　distortion of the opponent's image, for example using a massive quantity of ad hominem;

(2)　decontextualization of the opposing view: this phenomenon is in turn linked to the scapegoat mechanism (which often relies on gossiping dynamics) that I have already illustrated in [7]. Bollas also adds that "The extreme of this act is the removal of a victim from his tribe, home (i.e., context), isolated for purposes of persecution" [18] (p. 208);

(3)　denigration, depicting the opponent's position as ridiculous;

(4)　caricature, which helps delineate and identify the group or the ideas that have to be considered undesirable and so "killed";

(5)　change of name: I just illustrated above speaking of Jews and Vietnamese people as an act of the elimination of proper names ("kikes" for Jews, "gooks" for Vietnamese people and of Berlusconi). It is pretty obvious that this elimination reverberates the subsequent potential elimination of the people/ideas from the socio-political scene and in the worst case from the very "community of living people".[7]

(6)　categorization as aggregation, when the individual is transferred to a general category, usually with a bad connotation, in which he/she loses his/her identity and qualities: "he/she is a psychopath", "he/she is an immigrant", "he/she is a former alcoholic".

To be simple and clear from the perspective of the philosophy of violence: here, I am not referring to the more or less legitimate desire of the fascist (and of all human beings) to win against others, to become richer or to acquire power and command, but to the extremely violent and harmful tools he/she uses that, because of their radical character, always surpass in cruelty the tools used by the opponents, which are less violent and so "constitutively" weaker if compared with those used by the fascist.

This consideration also clearly explains the rapid implementation of a "virtuous" circle of evil. All opposition, that the germinal fascist state of the mind depicts as weak and with the stigmas of doubt and complexity, quickly actually becomes weak, doubtful and vulnerable to everyone embedded in that very opposition and so perceived as weak by the collectivity dominated by the fascist state of the mind. It is just this cluster of violent effects, so paradigmatic in the case of the fascist state of the mind, that political correctness aims at contrasting: the "oppositions" here are instead simple groups, genders, sexual minorities, etc., affected by verbal and written abuses of politically "uncorrect", not necessarily fascist, people. Indeed, political correctness also refers to less violent abuses, with respect to the ones perpetrated by the fascist state of the mind, though still serious and worth being contrasted.

Certainly related to this fascistic aspect (and to other less violent aspects, which live undisturbed in our mass media marketing, newspapers, social networks and books) is the general aggressive component of so-called "conversational dominance", which asymmetrically establishes an unequal

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[6]　Salmi [16] usefully lists the various effects of genocide under the category of alienating violence, when a person is deprived of her/his rights to emotional, cultural and intellectual growth, by means of racism, social ostracism and ethnocide. This has to be distinguished from repressive violence, which resorts to a mere deprivation of basic rights other than the right to survival and protection from injury, including civil, political and social rights [17] (p. 320).

[7]　Other processes of methodical "substitution" (especially active in the case of Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeitepartei) were related to: (1) the substitution of religion by the instrumentalization of art; (2) the substitution of art by propaganda; (3) the substitution of propaganda by indoctrination; (4) the substitution of culture by monumentalism; (5) the substitution of politics by esthetics; (6) the substitution of esthetics by terror (masses, already transformed into a homogenous conglomeration where the elbow room that would enable any political or cultural relation is missing, are further weakened through the erasure of the very faces, metaphorically, aiming toward a total anonymization, and any sense of individual responsibility) [19].

distribution of entitlements and rights, such as the opportunity to introduce new topics, and verbally victimizes some participants.[8] Furthermore, this level political correctness can produce a positive role.

The emphasis on the role of fallacious argumentation in the formation of the fascist state of the mind can easily explain how abusive "manipulations" in discourse interaction at the social level (through written text, speech and visual messages) are important in totalitarian states and collectivities, but also in standard professional settings, institutions, families, etc. They are violent tools used by dominants to establish inequalities of various types and possibly to perform intellectual genocide, when they achieve their absolute target of annihilating opponents. I have to say that political correctness is not in general applied to many demagogical manipulations typical of politicians, mass media and financial authorities of our times, which I consider deeper cases of abuse and violence, even if, maybe, it should be. It easily vaporizes, when in contact with, so to say, strong powers, for example political or economical, because trying to "correct" weak and vulnerable people is easier, since political correctness is related to the use of that simple weapon consisting of natural language. Van Dijk lists the major argumentative and structural tools that are involved in manipulation processes, which are almost always devoted to focusing on those cognitive and social characteristics of the recipient that make them more vulnerable and less resistant:

> (a) Incomplete or lack of relevant knowledge—so that no counter-arguments can be formulated against false, incomplete or biased assertions; (b) Fundamental norms, values and ideologies that cannot be denied or ignored; (c) Strong emotions, traumas, etc. that make people vulnerable; (d) Social positions, professions, status, etc. that induce people into tending to accept the discourses, arguments, etc. of elite persons, groups or organizations. These are typical conditions of the cognitive, emotional or social situation of the communicative event, and also part of the context models of the participants, i.e., controlling their interactions and discourses. [...] [Moreover, discourse structures materialize suitable constraints which favor manipulations:] (a) Emphasize the position, power, authority or moral superiority of the speaker(s) or their sources—and, where relevant, the inferior position, lack of knowledge, etc. of the recipients; (b) Focus on the (new) beliefs that the manipulator wants the recipients to accept as knowledge, as well as on the arguments, proofs, etc. that make such beliefs more acceptable; (c) Discredit alternative (dissident, etc.) sources and beliefs; (d) Appeal to the relevant ideologies, attitudes and emotions of the recipients [21] (pp. 375–376).

At this point, we can say that the exercise of political correctness implements a moral attitude that is capable of annihilating some of the violent results I have described in this section: consequently, we can easily conclude that, surely, politically correctness is good.

## 4. Overmorality: When Humans Are Too Politically Correct

Typical of the fascist state of the mind I illustrated in the previous section are also the so-called cases of omittive genocide, which resort to the absence of reference when the life, work or culture of an individual or group is intentionally not referred to. Of course, this is an ordinary tool that, when performed systematically and constantly against well-chosen targets, can be both at the basis of the fascist state of the mind and a simple tool in the subtle violent dynamics of everyday life, á la "Desperate Housewives".

It is at this level that we can envisage the first bad effects of political correctness. To be politically correct is often, too often, especially now, related to two main aspects, linked to "omittive" behaviors:

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8    [20], Chapter 8: "Dispute and aggression" also studies the role of insults as a precursor to physical aggression in their intertwining with arguments that can be used to establish sociability.

(1)   hypocrisy; we just condemn almost innocent verbal intemperances and easily employ all our indignation (and all our moral energies) against the expression "The Trio of Chubby Girls nearly an Olympic Miracle", forgetting that in Western society, women are killed and abused in more serious ways: when concretely faced with this problem, we have already spent all our moral energies in being politically correct, in punishing the uncorrect verbal abuser and, so, in feeling so morally proud, and also, pathetically, I have to say, in feeling ourselves exonerated from further commitment to defend the female gender. Political correctness is in this case a violent way of omitting to speak or to treat more urgent problems of violence and abuses, reaching a hypocritical pacifying state, as bluntly reported in a popular article entitled "Do we want to be politically correct or do we want to reduce partner violence in our community?" [22].[9] Moreover, the pressure to appear politically correct can lead to the phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance, as reported by [11]. Pluralistic ignorance is the overestimation of a group endorsement of an attitude or a norm when, in fact, it enjoys little support among group members. Van Boven explains that the desire to appear politically correct in order to be deemed as ethically sensitive can indeed lead people to support affirmative action despite privately held doubt, increasing the erroneous perception that a particular norm is widely accepted in a group. This obviously also leads to the hypocritical acceptance and diffusion of controversial norms for politically-correct behavior;

(2)   abstractness and idealization: often, political correctness is related to too controversial new moral values, which do not necessarily represent an increase of dignity of the people involved. Indeed, it may cause episodes of "sweeter discrimination", which is perceived less verbally aggressive, for the lexicon used, by the perpetrators, but it is still felt as absolutely discriminatory by the victims. In this perspective, politically-correct behaviors aim at favoring (and at the same time derive from) abstract and ideal discussions and debates about some minor "rights" to be preserved and defended, diverting attention from more serious moral issues of social, political and economic life.[10]

## 4.1. Overmorality

The first aspect I have just introduced a few lines above is related to the problem I called ([7], Chapter 6) overmorality. I maintain that overmorality (that is, the presence of too many moral values attributed to too many human features, things, event and entities) is dangerous, because it furnishes too many opportunities to trigger more violence by promoting plenty of unresolvable conflicts. I recently realized that overmoralization is analogous to the problem of overcriminalization, when I found the book by Husak [23]: overcriminalization presents similar discontent with respect to overmoralization. For example, Husak contends that the state lacks a good reason to punish drug users and that, thanks to overcriminalization, injustice (consequently) increases, and it is pervasive throughout the criminal domain: the results of criminal justice in the presence of overcriminalization are often perverse and "unjust", with the consequence of an exceptional and expensive quantity

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[9]   A paradoxical event that concerned political correctness has been the cancellation of the television program Politically Incorrect, a political talk show hosted by Bill Maher that aired from 1993 to 2002. Six days after the 11 September 2001 attacks, Dinesh D'Souza appeared on the program. He commented on the event by criticizing people who suggested terrorists were cowards by saying, "Look at what they did. You have a whole bunch of guys who were willing to give their life; none of them backed out. All of them slammed themselves into pieces of concrete. These are warriors". Maher agreed with D'Souza's comments and said, "We have been the cowards. Lobbing cruise missiles from two thousand miles away". Maher's comments ultimately led to advertisers ending their support and his show being canceled. This is a funny paradoxical story in which we can see both the moral and violent character of political correctness at work: there were subsequently comments in various media on the irony that a show called Politically Incorrect was canceled because its host had made a supposedly politically-incorrect comment (cf. Wikipedia, entries Politically Incorrect and Dinesh D'Souza.)

[10]   We have to say that, for example mass media, which are strong sustainers and promoters of political correctness, are instead, on multiple occasions, far from being politically correct, so promoting, for example, hate speech, unaware of the politically-incorrect use of language, images or cartoons that irritate or provoke religious groups and devotion to horrible politicians who, so to say, "cannot be criticized".

of people in prison. Provocatively, Husak contends that a right not to be punished should be implemented, given the fact that, like Jeremy Bentham already contended, any punishment is a violence. Why would this right deserve less protection than free speech, freedom of association or liberty of conscience? Too many people are more or less violently legally punished because of the infringement of mere mala prohibita and not because they also did mala in se. Thus, often, those punishments are not deserved, not even as mere didactic examples to be presented to other humans. A description of the main assumptions indicated by Husak is simply given by Donoso [24]:

> Husak exposes with clarity how a system characterized by overcriminalization puts at stake basic principles of the rule of law by making people unaware of what types of conduct are criminally proscribed; precluding them from having adequate notice of some of their legal obligations; and, ultimately, by undermining one of the main goals of the system of law, namely, to guide people's behavior (p. 11). Overcriminalization also breaks principles of legality by making the criminal law outsource from non-criminal branches of the law (p. 13), which runs the serious risk of making the criminal law even less intelligible for the layperson and making its limits dependent on the limits of spheres of law that are beyond its proper domain. Despite these and other reasons to be worried about overcriminalization, Husak emphasizes—guided by "the peculiar American penal context" (p. 14)—that the principal reason to be troubled by having too much criminal law is that it produces too much punishment. That is the most urgent source of injustice on which the book focuses.

Analogously, I think that an excess of morality coincides with an excess of punishment and conflict, and this explains my sympathy for Husak's ideas. Political correctness, today, tends to project moral worth to too many aspects of life, also extremely marginal: our example of "Chubby Girls" is eloquent. It is nice to see people (and especially males) so worried about the fact that Olympic girls can be so easily offended, but attributing such a value to the female body, so that you are forbidden to say it is "chubby" without being severely punished, is too much. Indeed, this moral attitude trivially conflicts, for example, with my traditional moral frameworks (and of many people like me) that are more worried about violence against women through rape and murder or through much more violent abusive verbal vulgarity. Moreover, we do not have to forget that an excess of too disputable political correctness creates in some people and groups an unwelcome climate of repression.

Indeed, I think that our era is characterized by a huge quantity of fragmentary, often contradictory, moral values and allegiances that affect human behavior in confusing and conflicting ways: the excess of new values related to a sophisticated and controversial exercise of political correctness forms an important part of this set. This complexity often makes people simply ignorant of basic moral rules, which would be instead useful for their practical life in a community, to avoid potential violent conflicts. Indeed, it can be contended that fragmented pieces of morality can corrupt and transform more basic and fruitful tenets. The stoics always emphasized the need to limit the over-expansion of morality. They contended that humans could recognize that many of the values they attribute to events, behaviors, artifacts, and so on, should be considered indifferent. On closer analysis, many things are indifferent (as in the case of some of the excessively questionable moral values invented by political correctness), and to take excessive moral care of them is wrong and pernicious. The stoics are very severe against overmorality:

> Since such things as health, wealth or reputation could not affect virtue, it made no difference to the wise man whether he had them or not, and he could not consider them good or evil. Zeno termed them all "indifferents", but he called such things as health and wealth "according to nature" and the opposite of these "contrary to nature". [...] But even if the virtue of the wise man was not affected by the loss of property, it was necessary for him to earn his own living and to support his family. Zeno called actions of this kind "duties", "acts of which a reasonable account can be given". A man could be virtuous in

sickness or poverty but from the practical point of view he had to pay enough attention to health to be a good soldier in the defense of his country and enough attention to money to earn his own living [25] (pp. 152–153).

Duties of this kind are of low or no moral value, seen in proportion to how they aid the natural instinct for self-preservation. Hence, it seems clear that:

(1)   if we deprive "things" of their excessive moral value and reduce them to "preferable" or "not preferable" targets, which are related to merely "practical" duties, it is less likely they can trigger deep passion and unmanageable intra-personal and interpersonal conflicts, and we will certainly be less inclined to use them as a way of punishing ourselves and other human beings for not respecting our too many unquestionable moral commitments; less wrongdoing would help us, like Coeckelbergh [26] (p. 243) says, "[...] to set up institutions that prevent 'interminable generations of prisoners' and pay more attention to those who do good in spite of, and in response to, the tragic character of human action and human life";

(2)   unfortunately, to espouse the doctrine of the indifferents is still a strong "moral option", which can generate conflict with people who think those things you do not consider to be valuable are instead worthy of being endowed with some positive moral values and certainly not to be neglected from this point of view.

In Section 2, I have said that, from the moral point of view, political correctness represents an example of stoic moral behavior because it aims at weakening risky conflicts, violence, oppression, etc., deriving for instance from some verbal expressions that originate in those cases in which humans perform an act of verbal or written abuse. From another, still stoic, perspective, we have just seen that political correctness is also responsible for an increase of that overmorality already present in our Western societies, prone to create new conflicts and consequently new potential violence.

### 4.2. Is Silence Politically Correct?

We still have to work on the second aspect illustrated above at the beginning of Section 4, regarding the fact that abstractness and idealization often affect political correctness. We said political correctness is related to too controversial values, which do not necessarily represent an increase of the dignity of the people at stake, and favors (and at the same time derives from) abstract and ideal discussions and debates about some minor "rights" to be preserved and defended, still diverting attention from more serious moral issues of social, political and economic life.

In a few words, political correctness often creates a kind of indirect silence about important concrete and important moral situations because of an excess of idealization and abstraction regarding minor issues, which play a strong distracting role. This is for example typical of politicians, journalists and in general of mass media. To better illustrate this aspect, we have to examine the general moral problem of silence. Silence can be seen as a way to morally and stoically disregard a situation (basically, we do not express our moral opinion or judgment) in order to avoid the possible rise of conflicts. It is something also implied in the behavior of politically-correct people who avoid expressing even true propositions in case they might offend the receiver. Regrettably, often silence can also favor violence: Zerubavel [27] (p. 16) observes that conspiracies of silence pose serious problems, and we therefore also need to examine their negative effects on social life.[11] For example taboos, euphemisms and tact are certainly related to the act of weakening our, so to speak, excessive "expressions of morality" (a kind of overmorality), but:

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[11]   The same consideration has been exposed by several authors of the so-called epistemology of ignorance [28–30]. Indeed, on several occasions, it is highlighted how feminist and anti-racist issues should be directly addressed without reserve and modesty in order to overcome the walls of silence that various cultural environments try to perpetuate with euphemistic labels, indirect comments or implicit references.

Aside from the pressure to see and hear no evil, there is also a strong social pressure not to acknowledge the fact that we sometimes do indeed see or hear it. Not only are we expected to refrain from asking potentially embarrassing questions, we are also expected to pretend not to have heard potentially embarrassing "answers" even when we actually have. By not acknowledging what we have in fact seen or heard, we can "tactfully" pretend not to have noticed it [27] (p. 30).

The relationship of this consideration with politically-correct behavior is extremely clear.

Moreover, from this point of view, not breaking the silence is a way of controlling violence and diminishing it. We have said that often silence triggers violence. Politics of denial and sex repression are clear examples: repression is often operated as an injunction to silence, an admission that there was (and is) nothing to say about such things, nothing to see and nothing to know, as has already been clearly analyzed by Foucault [31,32]. Additionally, we know perfectly well that, unfortunately, silence breakers are often ridiculed, vilified and even mobbed/ostracized, thus becoming victims of other kinds of violence. A similar destiny is now reserved for people who refuse to obey politically-correct behaviors they consider stupid and marginal.

Furthermore, various groups consider silence breakers as threats to their existence and safety. Similarly, various groups of the followers of hyper-inspective politically-correct policies consider breakers of political correctness as threats to their dignity and not only to the rights and dignity of the target people. In general moral cases, we also face a paradoxical effect when, in an effort to preserve group cohesion, conspiracies of silence can undermine that cohesion by jeopardizing the development of trusting relations presupposed by overt communication (anyway, is it not, maybe, the case that an excess of silence due to political correctness behaviors inside a group is a menace to communications and group cohesion and to the "development of trusting relations presupposed by overt communication"?).

Silence is also embedded in conflicting moral situations. With the "moral" scope of "protecting" her family, a woman who suspects that her husband is molesting their daughter may thus pretend not to notice it. In such a way, she perpetuates the inflicted violence, but by breaking the silence, she would attack the integrity of the family as a whole, which is always seen as a value. Conspiracies of silence may also trigger feelings of loneliness.

On the other hand, the moral non-violent function of silence has to be emphasized and, so, its counterpart in the case of political correctness: "[...] denial also helps protect others besides oneself. Being unaware that the person with whom I am talking is constantly yawning may indeed be self-protective, yet pretending not to notice it so as not to embarrass him is clearly motivated by altruistic concerns" [27] (p. 75) . Being tactfully inattentive and discreet helps save the public image of our neighbors and avoids conflicting with them and hurting their feelings. Of course, the conspiracy of silence does not protect only individuals, but also the group collective image and safety.

Finally it is worth mentioning an issue that an anonymous reviewer submitted to my attention, related to a specific relationship between silence and political correctness. Sometimes, political correctness produces what the reviewer calls injurious "silence", which seems akin to voluntary, but unjustifiable, "blindness" regarding instances of injustice. For example, in current universities, the administrations refuse to use ethnic or racial descriptions regarding perpetrators of crimes or misdemeanors. Gender identification appears unobjectionable in crime reportage, but otherwise descriptions of, say, assailants tend to be of such generality as to be quite useless as a guide for police or anxious students. Further, it appears that also broader issues, like the details of possible connections between violence and ethnic groups, tend to be exaggeratedly precluded by political correctness as areas for scientific investigation.

Other aspects of silence less related to the problem of politically-correct behavior are very interesting and have to be reported. Silence is also used to help people in crossing the line into committing violence: they are kept in ignorance of what they are doing for as long as possible. Keeping people in the dark is often performed by manipulating ambiguity and misunderstanding

in order to promote wrongdoing [33]. Other related ways of encouraging violent behavior, which in multiple ways comply with the lack of information and/or silence, are related to:

(1)  diffusion of responsibility (the larger the group, the less responsible and informed any individual member feels);

(2)  division of labor (which helps conceal responsibility and even the possibility of tracking and individuating the single responsibility as regards harm perpetrated);

(3)  exploitation of trust and loyalty (when, for example, people at the bottom trust the decision-makers at the top to do the right thing and unaware, become evildoers);

(4)  suppression of private doubts and inhibitions thanks to the immersion in groups (whatever their peaceful private feelings, people tend to express only the "correct" view imposed by a group they belong to, for example of strong hatred against an enemy).[12]

Furthermore, the so-called "ostrich effect" is related to the problem of silence.[13] Basically, the ostrich effect is the tendency to ignore unpleasant information by means of avoidance and/or denial. The result is to keep silent on certain matters, thus blocking the possibility that a certain piece of information is made publicly available or acknowledged. This is also described, still in metaphorical terms, by the English expression "the elephant in the room", to refer to an object that everybody is indeed aware of, yet no one wants to publicly acknowledge [27]. After all, when adopted, political correctness can obliterate the actual moral thoughts of people, so favoring deception or miscommunication.

There are a number of reasons why people prefer not to publicly acknowledge that they have certain problems. Consider, for instance, the case of some holocaust survivors who refused to recount their violent experiences passing on the same attitude to their children and grandchildren. What they experienced in the concentration camps was so violent and horrific that they decided not to disclose it even to their closest relatives. Additionally, even when asked to explicitly mention some experience from that time, they still resisted by resorting to the use of euphemisms, for example, in the case of holocaust, "unmentionable years" or "the war". Paradoxically, the recourse to euphemisms (that basically change the names of certain events) allows victims to refer to brutal experiences without actually mentioning them. Holocaust survivors are "silent witnesses", who prefer not to share their experiences because it would be extremely painful and traumatic to disclose them.[14] These cases can be also considered as related to the behaviors, so to speak, of self-political correctness, to hide those memories that can harm again those victims.

Conversely, one may opt not to talk about certain events not because of a trauma, but because it might involve fear or lack of confidence, or because of political correctness. An example similar to the one related to domestic sexual abuse is the following: in a family, other members may decide to keep silent about a member's drinking problem just because they are afraid of the consequences and conflicts or because they are afraid of not being able to address the problem or tackle it. Active avoidance is meant as a survival strategy, when, for instance, people lack the resources to cope with a problem.

On some other occasions, denial is just a matter of tact. We purposefully avoid noticing a certain detail in our friend just because we are supposed to ignore it. This may regard more or less trivial things like, for instance, bad breath, weight gain or hair loss. Contrary to the examples of the bad application of political correctness, in these and similar cases, even if the values at stake are trivial and simple, silence is still good because it is able to protect individual local affective relationships. Furthermore, disclosing and communicating certain information may irritate people or make them

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12  These cases are typical of what is called structural violence, which I have described in [7], Chapter 1, and reiterated with some aspects of the kinds of disengagement of morality described in the Chapter 5 of the same book.

13  Cf. [34,35].

14  Aspects of violence pertaining to the Holocaust in the perspective of Hannah Arendt and feminism are dealt with in [36].

feel embarrassed. We would rather prefer not to make people lose face. This might also be related to privacy and its ethical underpinnings. For instance, we may omit to say that our colleague's husband cheated on her, thereby causing depression, when the boss is going to assign a new and important task, because that could influence his/her decision. Here, what is implicit is that the communication of certain information is not ethically neutral, as it can promote malicious gossiping or, even worse, discrimination or mobbing. More generally, even in the absence of a legal duty to privacy, silence can be a protective measure related to the respect of people's ability to develop and realize their goals.[15]

The ostrich effect can also be interpreted as a particular case of self-deception. More precisely, it stresses the relationship between language and self-deception. Indeed, silence is not an inattentive attitude, according to which we simply do not pay attention to something; it is an active way of diverting attention, such as we have illustrated above in the case of the side effects of some cases of political correctness. Paying attention to these aspects relates to the problem of the violent dimension of language. Silence and denial can be explicit responses to this. Language, which is indeed the product of massive cognitive processes made possible and reinforced also thanks to the docility of humans in communicating and in accepting information that arrives from other people, is a carrier of morality, but can turn out to be like a weapon able to harm people when adopted and constrained in politically-correct human environments.

In these final remarks, having seen the problem of political correctness in light of silence and the ostrich effect, we have tried to demonstrate how these aspects still point to the double face of political correctness: it can perform moral, violent and both moral and violent roles, depending on the time and contexts of its application.

## 5. Conclusions

In this article, I have tried to show that political correctness is not always a good policy and can very easily promote violence of various kinds. Political correctness obviously aims at moderating conflicts and, so, possible related violence, but at the same time, often establishes too many new moral values, supposed to be respected, which are sometimes easily considered of minor moral worth. Therefore, engaging in political correctness often reinforces that "overmorality" that grips current Western societies. Too many new disputable moral worths are at the same time sources of new conflicts and possible new violent outcomes: political correctness, exaggerated in abstractness and idealization, can easily be accused of disregarding more serious issues concerning social, political and economic life. Natural language, the main human tool to be controlled when adopting political correctness, turns out to be like a weapon able to harm people, because silencing or disregarding, superficially, some parts of language that carry traditional moral values can originate offense and violence. I have tried to demonstrate how this fact is related to the double face of political correctness, and I concluded that it can play both moral and violent roles, depending on the time and contexts of its application. My analysis adopted a theoretical strategy involving moral stoicism, the problem of "silence", the "fascist state of the mind" and the concept of "overmorality", which I consider fundamental in the current debate about the relationship between morality and violence.

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[15]   More details concerning the general ethical and violent role of silence and the ostrich effect are illustrated in [7], Chapter 3.

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