ON TERRORISM[1]

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The *Economist* magazine of 5 January, 1974 ends an article called "Your Neighbourhood Terrorist" with the following sentences.

> Kidnappers cannot operate without safe houses where they can hide their victims. Even the most transient of assassins need to borrow cars and money and perhaps weapons as well. There are people in Britain who have been prepared to supply that sort of logistical support to the bombers of the Angry Brigade and the IRA. Their motives are various and often confused, but to explain the climate that makes it possible for the modern terrorist to breathe one has to fall back on the truth of an old Turkish proverb; fish rot from the head downwards. To the extent that some academics and communicators can still be found who will defend the fashionable apologies for violence, they are helping to make the terrorist possible.

I do not know what kind of intellectual rottenness the *Economist* had in mind; but it seems to me a good proverb. I will try to explain what kind *I* have in mind. I wish to do so without presupposing that terrorism is in all cases unjustified, as perhaps the *Economist* does. "Defending the fashionable apologies for violence" is only one of the possible philosophical sins (if it is a sin), and perhaps not the most damaging of them.

The first thing to be clear about is that philosophy can do nothing to help in practical affairs unless it is devoted to producing cogent arguments. I can think of three kinds of philosophers whose efforts to help with practical problems (as philosophers certainly should) have been quite useless. The first kind consists of those who do not aim at rigour at all, but are more interested in producing exciting rhetoric. The second kind consists of those who are perfectly capable of writing rigorously about some other branch of philosophy (say mathematical logic), but, when they come on to talk about politics or morality or any other practical question, leave all that behind them – perhaps because, like Plato's sailors,[2] they do not think there can be any discipline of the intellect in practical affairs. The third kind consists of those who do claim to be producing arguments, and indeed closely meshed systems of argument, about practical affairs, but who rest the crucial, or as Rawls[3] has

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[2] *Republic*, 488 b.

[3] *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard U.P., 1971), p. 261.

it the Archimedean, points of their systems (what we might term their fulcra) upon nothing but private intuitions or prejudices.

The tragedy is that these kinds of people, often with the best of intentions, do real and lasting harm (perhaps more harm than those philosophers, sometimes good ones, who make little attempt to say anything of immediate practical relevance). I think that there are German philosophers who bear much more blame than Frege for the flow of thought one of whose results was Hitler. If philosophy is to make its own peculiar and distinctive contribution to practical affairs, it can do it only by insisting always on rigour in practical argument; and rigour can be achieved only by careful attention to what we are saying – to the concepts we are using, their logical properties and hence to the validity of arguments in which they occur. And that is why the study of these concepts and their logical properties, their analysis or their meaning, must be the centre and foundation of the philosopher's work on practical problems. Any philosopher who despises this kind of investigation is condemning himself to competing with politicians and journalists, lacking perhaps their skills and contributing nothing special of his own.

I have therefore devoted most of my effort as a moral philosopher to conceptual studies, although my aim was always to do something for practical problems. Aristotle said that we enquire into what goodness is, not in order that we may know, but in order that we may become good men;[4] but he did enquire into what goodness is,[5] as the necessary means to that end; that is what the *Ethics* are all about. I will try to say how the conceptual study of the moral words helps in understanding, and might even help in preventing, terrorism. For it is conceptual misunderstandings and the unwillingness to think that lie at the root of much terrorism, as of other violence.

In my view (an unpopular one) the only method of reasoning which can import any adequate rigour into thought about practical affairs has at least strong affinities with utilitarianism. I do not say that the method I am advocating *is* utilitarian, because there are many different kinds of utilitarianism, which the ignorant often confuse; and therefore to call any method utilitarian is to expose it to the fashionable vilifications of those who do not feel the need to identify their target very accurately. Better to say what the method is as clearly and precisely as possible. I have tried to do this in various places,[6] so I will not attempt it here. I claim that the method is consistent with, and practically equivalent to, versions of Kantianism, the Golden Rule, the Ideal Observer Theory, the Rational Contractor Theory (though not Rawls' version), and Rule-utilitarianism; and that it can be grounded on the view about the logical properties of the moral concepts which I have advocated. This too I shall have to leave unexplained.

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[4] *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103 b 27.

[5] *Ibid.*, 1105 b 19.

[6] *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1963), chs. 6 ff.; "Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism," in H. D. Lewis (ed.), *Contemporary British Philosophy* 4 (London, Allen and Unwin, 1976), and refs.

Briefly, according to this view, if we are asking whether we ought to do a certain action, we are asking for a universal prescription for situations exactly like this one, hypothetical as well as actual, to be applied no matter what individuals occupy what roles in them. Since, in the various possible hypothetical situations, I would occupy the roles of all the other persons affected, this way of putting the question makes me give equal weight to the equal interests of all these parties; and this is one way of putting the utilitarian principle.

I shall be discussing in the main the moral question of what can *justify* terrorist acts; but there is another question that I shall touch on from time to time, and which we must not confuse with the first question. I mean the question of what arguments might, if he accepted them, stop a terrorist from doing these acts. The two questions are not the same, because if a terrorist did not have moral reasons for his acts in the first place (if, for example, he was doing them on purely self-regarding nationalistic grounds) to convince him that he had no *moral* justification for them might make no difference to his actions. The same two kinds of question have to be distinguished in the case of those who start wars. I have argued elsewhere[7] that the roots of war lie in two alternative but combinable states of mind which may be called nationalism and fanaticism. Nationalism, if we extended the sense of the word "nation" somewhat, could include the self-centred pursuit of the interest of any individual group. The logical task of defining what I mean by "individual group" is too complex to be undertaken here; but, roughly, those who are fighting for "the Palestinian people", and whose motives would not make them do the same for any other people having precisely the same universal properties, are nationalists. I argued in the same place that, since the prescriptions of the nationalist were not universalizable, they could not count as moral prescriptions. The fanatic, on the other hand, is fighting for a cause which can be specified in strictly universal terms; his prescriptions can therefore, so far as their form goes, count as moral ones; we cannot exclude them from the arena of moral argument on that score.

Turning aside for a moment to the question of arguments that might stop wars, as opposed to merely showing them to be immoral: I argued in the paper referred to that, because only nations have the ability to make wars of the conventional kind, major wars (as opposed to limited ones) can start only if nationalism and fanaticism are combined; in modern conditions not enough of those who control national policies are going to be fanatics for them to start a major war for purely fanatical reasons; and, since national interests (again in modern conditions) cannot be advanced by a major war, nobody is going to start one on nationalistic grounds alone, if he knows the facts about military technology and is clear about where the interests of his nation really lie. A major war would benefit nobody. There have been some less than major wars recently; of these, the Vietnam war (which was not *much* less than major) could be argued to have been the result of nationalism combined with

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[7] "Peace," in my *Applications of Moral Philosophy* (London, Macmillan, 1972).

fanaticism on both sides, whereas the war in the Middle East has been almost exclusively nationalist in origin. One of the reasons (there are of course others) why the great powers have not got involved in it to the degree that the U.S. did in Vietnam is that no cause has emerged which could engage fanatical sentiments on their part, and the pursuit of national self-interest has not seemed to them to justify large-scale intervention. We might have had a Vietnam-type situation in the Middle East if the Arabs had been more homogeneously revolutionary, and if, therefore, the opposite kind of fanatic in the U.S. had felt moved to oppose them with military force. The only kinds of fanaticism that have united each side in the Middle East have been religious kinds; and fortunately these have not struck enough of an answering chord elsewhere to lead to military intervention, as opposed to aid, by non-Arab countries.

Because of this inhibition on war in the conventional sense, people who cannot command the cooperation or the resources to wage it often take to terrorism. To some extent terrorism is a substitute for conventional war. This might be a merit, if it were not the case that the two kinds of violence are so easily combinable, and so often connected – it was an act of terrorism which sparked off the first World War.

I shall not be able, as a full-scale treatment of terrorism would, to include a definition of it and a classification of its kinds. I will mention one broad division: that into terrorist acts committed by the nationals of a country against their own government or fellow-nationals, and those committed by the nationals of one country against another. I am not going to deal with coercion by fear in general, or violence in general; nor with a kind of political violence which I do not classify as terrorism, namely the attempt by violence to depose a government in *coups d'état* and revolutions of the ordinary kind. Terrorism is engaged in when there is no immediate hope of deposing the government; it may be intended as a prelude to revolution, but it *is* not revolution. The attempted assassination of Hitler was not terrorism, because it was hoped immediately to set up a new government which would end the war; on the other hand many of the activities of the Resistance in German-occupied territories were terroristic as I understand the term, even if they were directed only against the German forces. This may remind us that the question whether terrorism can ever be morally justified at least *arises* for those of us who approved of the activities of the Resistance.

After these preliminaries, let us now apply what I said about nationalistic and fanatical motives for making war to the kindred question about terrorism. I think that by parity of reasoning it could be shown that purely nationalistic terrorism cannot normally be justified on moral grounds. Unless we are prepared to say that anybody should terrorize or make war on us in an identical situation in which the roles were reversed, we cannot justify such acts morally. There will, however, be exceptions in both cases. Defensive wars (if the term could ever be satisfactorily defined) might get through this test; and so might acts of terrorism in cases where the terrorists are acting on behalf of an oppressed section of the population which has absolutely no alternative

means of securing redress of its just grievances. Such people might claim that they were prepared to have anybody do the same to them in a like case. There will be problems about what are to count as just grievances; these I shall not have space to deal with. It will have to be shown that there are no other means. Those who seek to justify terrorism in Northern Ireland claim that it was the only means open to the Catholic minority of securing equal treatment. I do not believe it; I believe, in fact, that terrorism on both sides has done more to delay progress towards political equality there than to hasten it, though I would not say the same about demonstrations and the like; but these are factual questions which are beyond the scope of this paper. In general, I am inclined to say that an adequate moral defence for nationalistic terrorism will very seldom be found, and that such defences would seldom be even offered unless they were stiffened by an element of fanaticism, namely the fanatical pursuit of "liberation" for its own sake, whoever is being "liberated".

Fanatical motives for terrorism are more difficult to handle. The fanatical terrorist is a person who attaches so much importance to some ideal, that he is prepared to prescribe that he himself should be murdered, kidnapped, tortured, *etc.*, if it were necessary in order to advance the cause which he has embraced. He is not seeking self-centred ends – indeed the true fanatic is the most unselfish and self-sacrificing of people.

But before we come to the fanatic, let us ask how the ordinary person who is not a fanatic should reason about the justification, if any, of acts of terrorism. He will first of all ask what, in actual fact, the terrorist is doing when he commits a particular act. He is, say, killing a lot of people in an airport lounge with a sub-machine-gun; he is bereaving their children and spouses (and bereavement is very often the greatest of human ills); he is wounding others; he is disrupting air travel, which may have far-reaching though hard-to-measure consequences if people who ought to go to places decide not to for fear of such attacks; he is causing governments and airlines to spend a lot of money on precautions against terrorism, and so increasing taxes and the price of air travel; and so on. On the other hand, he is also (or so he thinks) helping to produce a state of affairs in which the cause he has embraced (say the expropriation of capitalists' wealth) is likely to be advanced.

All these things that he is doing are consequences or hoped-for consequences of his pulling the trigger. If anybody wishes to label me a "consequentialist" for taking such things into consideration, then let him. Perhaps he might also like to suggest how a serious discussion of terrorism could be carried on *without* taking them into consideration (are we perhaps to discuss the nature and quality of the act of trigger-pulling or of finger-crooking *per se*?).

More important is to decide how we should assign weight, in the normal argument, to these various consequences of the act. We shall do it, if my view is correct, by first asking *how much* the interests of the various victims or beneficiaries are going to be affected by various possible outcomes of the act, and secondly *how likely* each of these various outcomes is. We are thus landed with a complicated calculus of utilities and probabilities whose resulting

balance can in practice be only estimated (which does not prevent it being extremely obvious in many cases whether it is favourable or unfavourable). Cost-benefit analyses are not popular now in some quarters; and they have indeed been misused, by failing to include very important costs and benefits (often because they are not measurable in terms of money). However, I cannot see any rational way of approaching questions like this except by asking how people's interests are likely to be affected. After all, what makes terrorism wrong in most cases is that people do not want to be killed or bereaved.

All the same, the fact that these very difficult judgments of probability are nearly always involved leads in practice to a necessary modification of the procedure I have so far outlined. Since in particular cases we cannot be sure how the balance will turn out, and since, if we try to do the calculations, we shall often deceive ourselves (because of self-interest or of fanaticism), most of us use general principles for judging such questions. The status of these principles is something that it is very easy to be confused about. They are principles for assessing, not the rightness of acts, but their moral rationality at the time at which they are done. The archangel Gabriel, who knows the whole history of the world, will be able to tell which acts were, in the event, right; but we do not have this knowledge, and therefore we have to make do with trying to do the act which is most *likely* to be right – the act which is morally rational as I shall say.[8] And that is where these general principles come in. What we have to do in practice is to form for ourselves, in the light of our own and other people's experience, general principles whose general acceptance (there are two senses of "general" here, neither of which is equivalent to "universal" as I have been using it[9]) is most likely to lead to people doing the acts which turn out to have been right. And we shall be most likely to do what is right if we stick to the principles, not indeed, as Moore[10] thought, on absolutely all occasions, but at least unless we have a pretty cast-iron reason, based on firm knowledge that the case is an unusual one, for breaking them.

Coming back now to our argument with the terrorist: we have to ask whether the act which he is proposing is most likely to be in the greatest interest of all those affected by it. We have principles for judging this, and their effect will almost certainly be to show that it is not. The terrorist, on the other hand, may claim that we are wrong about this. What sort of difference are we then having with him?

It may be that he has rival general principles which he claims to be more likely than ours, if generally accepted, to lead to acts which are in the greatest interests of those affected. He may, for example, say that the furtherance of the revolution is of such great advantage to posterity that principles giving free rein to acts of terrorism with this aim, although initially they lead to suffering, are most likely to promote people's interests in the long run. If he takes this line, our difference with him is a factual one. For it is a factual

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[8] See "Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism," p. 125.

[9] For the distinction see my "Principles," *Ar. Soc. Proc.* 73 (1972/3).

[10] *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge, England, Cambridge U.P., 1903) p. 162.

question what states of affairs will result in the future from different alternative actions; and it is also a factual question how much the people affected will like them.

It is, indeed, possible to dream up cases in which acts of terrorism could be justified on utilitarian grounds. I have mentioned one already: I have no doubt that *some* of the acts of members of the Resistance against the Germans could be so justified. And in a different world it might be the case that principles enjoining the commission of acts of terrorism on a wide variety of types of occasion would, if generally accepted, lead to the furtherance of people's interests. The question is, though, whether such particular cases are *likely* to be encountered in the world as it is, and whether, therefore, the world in general *is* such that the principles of the terrorist have a higher acceptance-utility than those which most of us embrace.

This, as I said, is a factual question, but not one that can easily be settled. The best way of settling it is to look at history; to see what results terrorist acts have had in the past: whether they have led to the good results hoped for by the terrorists, and whether these have outweighed the obvious sufferings and other evils caused. My own answer would be, "Very seldom". And then we should ask whether the situation of our own society at all resembles those situations in which terrorism did yield a balance of good, in the respects which made it do so. Again, my answer would be that it does not. Professor Peter Singer[11] has argued that the fact that a society is democratic does make a difference to the morality of breaking its laws – although he also acknowledges that imperfections in democracy may make this argument no longer hold for a particular society. He would, I hope, agree that a democracy has to be *very* imperfect before acts of real terrorism, as opposed to other forms of political law-breaking, become permissible.

The arguments so far have been factual – arguments about what will actually result from the acceptance of certain principles. The terrorist might now, however, seize on what looks like a weak point in my exposition, and produce an argument which is not factual. We spoke of a balance of good over evil (both evaluative terms); and it might be claimed that although it is a factual question what the consequences will be, it is not a factual question whether those consequences will be good or evil on balance. The terrorist might say that he disagrees fundamentally with us about what is a good state of society. So, although he admits that the results which would be produced by his acts of terrorism are as we predict, and that they would be bad by *our* standards, they are by his standards better than the existing state of society. But if he says this he may be misconceiving our arguments so far. We were not saying that *our own* preferences were to live in a society like the existing one rather than in the one that he seeks to bring about. We may indeed prefer this, but that was not our argument; it was, rather, that *the people affected* would prefer it. That is why I called it a factual argument, because that they would prefer it is a matter of fact. If the terrorist is saying that even though they would prefer things as

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[11] *Democracy and Disobedience* (Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1973).

they are, or as they would be without terrorism, the world would be a better place if things were different (say, if there were no more private property and everybody had to live in communes), then he is showing his colours as a true fanatic, and we can no longer argue with him on the former basis (even if, as is highly unlikely, he is sincere and clear-headed in what he says). For he is maintaining that the ideal of the propertyless society is so important that it ought to override all the actual desires of people, even of himself if he were in their situations and had their desires.

Before we discuss this kind of fanaticism, however, it may clarify matters if we first put aside certain spurious kinds which are very much more common. Of course most terrorists are not as clear-thinking as is required in order to engage in the sort of argument we have been having. They have an extremely selective view of the facts; they do not pay much attention to the facts on which we have been relying, such as the suffering that they are inflicting on others, and the rather dubious and over-optimistic nature of their own predictions. They give play to particular emotions to an extent which makes them incapable of logical thought. The philosopher cannot say anything that will help further an argument with such people; for he can only reason, and they will not. The argument will have to shift, instead, to the much more difficult moral question of what measures society can legitimately take in order to protect innocent people against them. But, putting aside such less pure-blooded fanaticisms, let us consider the logically possibly case of the man who says that his ideal of a propertyless society is so important that all these sacrifices are worth while in order to attain it, even if they were his own sacrifices.

I have given reasons in other places[12] for saying that we are never likely to meet such a person. Briefly, he can only say what he says if the importance he attaches to his ideal is great enough to outweigh all the sufferings caused by its pursuit and its realization. This means (to dramatize the argument in a manner suggested by C. I. Lewis[13]) that, were he to know that he was going to occupy, in random order, in a succession of qualitatively identical universes, roles corresponding to those of all his victims (major and minor) and of all the beneficiaries in succession, and not discount the future, he still thinks that this is what should be done in them. Suppose that he is going to kill ten people and wound twenty and bereave thirty and deter hundreds of thousands from travelling, and that others, moved by his example, will do the same in scores of cases; suppose that the resulting disruption is such that the propertyless society is really brought about, and that the people in it do not like it nearly as much as the present state of affairs. All these sufferings and dislikes have then to be added up and they have not to outweigh the importance which he and a very few others attach to having a propertyless society. I am claiming that nobody is going in fact to value what is in the two sides of the scale in such a

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[12] "Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism," pp. 121f.; "Reply to Katz," in B. Y. Khanbhai et al. (eds.), *Jowett Papers 1968–9* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1970), p. 52.

[13] *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (La Salle, Open Court, 1946), p. 547.

way as to be a true fanatic. People *appear* to be true fanatics because they have not paid attention to the facts or have not thought about them clearly. And the rotten fish-heads of the proverb are all those who talk in a way which impedes people from doing these two things.

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