

Terrorism is almost always morally unjustified, but it may be justified as the only way of preventing a “moral disaster”

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Can terrorism ever be morally justified? Igor Primoratz writes on the nature of terrorism and whether it is possible to defend terrorist attacks in isolated cases. He argues that definitions of terrorism cannot be based on the identity of those resorting to it and must therefore be extended to include ‘state terrorism’. He concludes that while terrorism is almost always unjustified from a moral perspective, under specific, extreme conditions, terrorist acts may be defended on account of the “moral disaster” they prevent or stop.



The worldwide public debate about terrorism that has gone on for more than a decade now has involved mostly scholars with backgrounds in political science, international relations, law, and public policy. It has also included politicians and ordinary citizens. The debate has great urgency as we are reminded, time and again, of the ubiquity of the terrorist threat. Nonetheless, there isn’t much agreement on any of the main questions raised by terrorism – conceptual, moral, or political. This is understandable in view of some basic flaws of the debate. One is the lack of clarity about what its subject is: just what is terrorism and who should count as a terrorist? Perhaps inevitably, the debate has often been clouded by emotions, moral passions, and political interests. Infested by moral relativism and double standards (“us” / “them”, state use of force/insurgent terrorism), it has often led to talking at cross purposes.

Philosophy can make a significant contribution to this debate at two levels: the conceptual and the moral. Philosophers are good at spotting and disentangling confusions and debunking double standards. Although some embrace some version of relativism, others can help overcome it, and put to rest the pernicious cliché “one person’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter”. Philosophers normally avoid conflating the conceptual and moral levels of debate. This makes it possible to construct a definition of terrorism that doesn’t beg the moral and political questions. They bring to bear major ethical theories, introducing order into an array of moral arguments for and against terrorism and helping people decide what position best reflects their moral values and political commitments.

If we are to define terrorism in a way helpful to the moral and political debate, we should put aside both the identity of those resorting to it and their ultimate political, ideological, or religious aims. We should rather understand terrorism in terms of just *what is done* and what the *proximate* aims of doing it are. Such a definition should be morally and politically neutral, and facilitate, rather than pre-empt, a well-focused moral debate. Terrorism, then, is the deliberate use of violence, or threat of its use, against innocent people, aiming to intimidate some other people into a course of action they otherwise wouldn’t take. Being agent-neutral, the definition doesn’t rule out state terrorism – a phenomenon well known in modern history, yet curiously ignored, or defined out of existence, in public debate. Indeed, historically, the state has been the greatest terrorist.



1972 Munich Terrorist Attack (Associated Press)

One major account of the morality of terrorism is provided by consequentialism: terrorism, like everything else, should be judged solely by consequences. When its rationally expected consequences are good on balance, it will

be morally justified. As Leon Trotsky famously said, given a paramount end, the question of the means becomes one of expediency rather than principle.

But surely it can't be right that life and limb of innocent civilians is fair game whenever it is expedient that it should be so. Here, as elsewhere, consequentialism proves much too permissive with regard to questionable and even repugnant means. Terrorism can't be judged solely by its consequences; first and foremost, it is a great wrong intrinsically, because of what it is: a violation of basic rights and a gross injustice.

A clear alternative to consequentialism is an absolute prohibition of intentional killing and maiming of some ordinary citizens in order to terrorise and coerce others. This may be thought as obvious a moral truth as any. But it is difficult to back this intuition with an argument that converts those who don't share it. And it is ever more difficult to uphold the absolutist position, as the critic constructs ever more catastrophic scenarios that can be averted only by terrorism. Should we insist on rights and justice even if the heavens fall?

What of a middle-of-the-road view? Terrorism is wrong in itself, for it violates some of our most important rights and constitutes a grave injustice. Still recourse to it may be morally permissible, if a people or a political community finds itself *in extremis*, and terrorism is the only way out. But then, just when is a people or a polity *in extremis*? Michael Walzer's statement of this view in his seminal book *Just and Unjust Wars* operates with the notion of "supreme emergency", when deliberate attacks on innocent civilians are the only way of coping with an imminent threat to the survival and freedom of a political community.

I find this vague and too permissive. My view is structurally similar, but much more restrictive. Terrorism is *almost* absolutely wrong, and may be considered only (i) in the face of a "moral disaster", understood in a special, highly restrictive sense: as an imminent threat of extermination or ethnic cleansing of an entire people, and (ii) when there are good reasons to believe that terrorism is the only way of preventing the disaster, stopping it in its tracks, or reversing a wide range of its consequences.

This is a good place to give some historical and contemporary examples of a morally justified act or campaign of terrorism. But I don't have any. Does this undermine my view of terrorism, showing that it has no purchase on reality, and offers no practical moral guidance? I think not. It is as it should be. Terrorism is the deliberate use of often lethal violence against innocent people for the sake of intimidating and coercing some other people. Such an extreme type of violence, used in order to terrorise and coerce, ought to be extremely hard to justify. So it shouldn't be thought odd that no case of terrorism so far has been morally justified, or that any resort to it in the future is extremely unlikely to be. After all, terrorism is almost absolutely morally wrong.

A more detailed discussion of the material in this article is available in [Terrorism: A Philosophical Investigation](#) (Polity, 2013).

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