

A psycho-epistemological analysis of terrorist and anti-terrorist moral deliberation

Chogollah Maroufi, Professor of Education, California State University, Los Angeles

Abstract

Demonizing, dehumanizing, and pathologizing terrorists as “the Other” will neither serve the field of scholarship nor it enhances efforts to reach for possible solutions. I suggest in this paper that an inclusionary approach instead would be a more beneficial approach. The latter approach however does not minimize the reprehensive and unacceptable nature of any atrocities committed by either the terrorists or the anti-terrorist in the name of stamping out terrorism. I further suggest that terrorists and people in general for that matter, devise a two-tiered psycho-epistemological deliberation system by which they maintain and utilize absolutist (deontological) and relativist (consequentialist) moral principles, seemingly working in tandem and cognitive harmony, at least from the agent’s perspective. Absolutist/deontological principles function as the guiding principles, and contextual/consequentialist principles function as means to the achieve goals and aspirations of the former. Here I attempt to examine how terrorists and anti-terrorists manage to engage in their respective atrocities while maintaining seemingly consistent and rationally viable narratives.

Introduction

Compared to other calamities such as natural disasters, incidents of terrorism in the West are rare occurrences but their psychological impact is server and long lasting. Western media coverage exacerbates the impact, magnifying an already horrifying situation, to the satisfaction and glee of terrorists. In turn groups emboldened by their success as it is evidence in the media, compete for even more dramatic impact. Terrorists’ race to outdo one another is evident in sheer number of successful suicide bombing attempted. In 1981 there were only one successful suicide bombing reported in the world. By 2005 there were 179 occurrences in 30 countries 88% of which occurred in Lebanon, Israel, Turkey, Russia, and Iraq¹. However, today most of suicide bombings occur on a daily basis in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and India. Additionally, it is estimated that terrorists are feverishly and assiduously planning dramatic attack on Western targets.

As Philip Zimbardo noted, “Terrorism is about one thing: psychology. It is the psychology of fear.”² It is “a particular vicious species of psychological warfare”³. Fear generated by terrorist acts is particularly unnerving, proportionate to the degree of gruesomeness and unpredictability of the terrorist act—one never knows where and when it may occur again. Terrorist carnage instills “the strongest fear because everyone is continually vulnerable.”⁴ Albert Bandura observes that although domestic crimes are more numerous and equally gruesome, they do not have the same impact as occasional terrorist attacks. Heightened sense of unpredictability

¹ Bernard Merari, “Psychological aspects of suicide bombing”, p. 103.

² Quoted in Bruce Bongar, “The psychology of Terrorism,” P. 3.

³ Martha Crenshaw, “The logic of terrorism: Terrorist behavior as a product of strategic choice,” p. 40.

⁴ Albert Bandura, “Mechanisms of moral disengagement”, p. 168.

and “high vulnerability of disruption” has a more psychological impact, more than, say, large number of people killed in driving every year or every month.⁵

Among terrorist acts suicide bombing has a unique and an unsettling affect on Western countries conscience. Talal Asad thinks that our “horror at suicide bombing” has something to do with the strange “embrace” of the suicide bomber and her victims. He says that we are not horrified as much with carpet bombing of Japanese, German, and Vietnamese villages cities as we are with a single act of suicide bombing. Furthermore, the unique horror of suicide bombing is not necessarily in its unannounced and surprise nature, e.g., in the middle of normal business hours. Talal says Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing were also surprise with no warning to the innocent Japanese citizens⁶.

What is the nature of epistemological and psychological disposition in humans who, given the “right” circumstances, can inflict immeasurable suffering on “the Other”, often with a sense of glee and accomplishment? Why is it that the same humans are horrified and dumbfounded when “the Other” attacks them with the same measure of inhumanity? This paper intends to explore a few epistemological and psychological mechanisms, which allows certain moral deliberations and disallows others.

Consequentialism and deontology: A two-tiered moral deliberation

At the outset I assume, without too much fanfare, that it is natural to engage, and indeed we do engage, in two dichotomous moral deliberations simultaneously and act upon them seemingly in a harmonious manner, with a peculiar division of labor for each kind of deliberation. These two areas of moral deliberations are deontology and consequentialism—two of the most common ethical theories that have been and still are the central sources of debate in modern moral philosophy. I do not intend to argue for the superiority of one over the other. Here I only briefly describe them and explain how they interact with one another in my conceptualized framework, and then I will utilize this conceptualization to proceed with the rest of this paper.

The term deontology originates from Greek *deon*, which means “you must” or “one ought”, relating to one’s obligations and duties, e.g., “You *ought* to do X,” or “You *ought not* to do X.” Deontologist believes that there are absolute moral principles that are discovered by either rational investigation or by some infallible authority. Immanuel Kant is a quintessential kind of deontologist who would advocate that logical reasoning is the only means of discovering the right and eternal moral principle principles and their accompanying duties and actions. These principles are similar to mathematical and geometrical principles, waiting to be discovered by reason alone. Pythagorean principle, for example, was not invented by Pythagoras. It was discovered and the principle remains true for all eternity. In the moral realm promise-keeping and telling truths are, according to Kant, analogous to eternal mathematical truth. However, some credit God or prophets for revealing moral truths to them. In short, for the purposes of this paper, an operational definition of deontological moral principles is absolute and eternal moral

⁵ Albert Bandura, “Mechanisms of moral disengagement”, p. 167.

⁶ Asad Talal, *On Suicide Bombing*, pp. 65-92

principles attained either by reason or by revelatory authority. The latter is accessed by faith and the former, by pure reason.

In contrast, consequentialism is a teleological, pragmatic, or instrumental approach to morality—a means—end methodology. Consequentialism renders an action right or wrong based on the value and usefulness of its results or consequences. There is absolute principle at work here. The principles are concocted or improvised based on contextual and human need in give time and place. Consequentialist has a choice among various available actions. Usually she chooses the one that gives her the most good or pleasure, or the ones that best realize her goals and aspirations. As it is evident in the initial definition, consequentialism manifests itself in a variety of paradigms and theoretical frameworks such as, ethical egoism, utilitarianism, cultural relativism, subjectivism, etc. Here instrumental rationality is a method of deliberation. In deontology pure reason or adherence to absolute or divine authority is the method of deliberation.

In a model I'm offering here, we utilize both of these paradigms or moral systems of deliberations in an apparent harmony. But usually others, who look at our deliberations from outside, may see as contradictory, unintelligible, and even downright psychotic. This is most evident when we examine how terrorist or anti-terrorists utilize these two systems in a contiguous manner. I suggest that deontological deliberations are used to establish our core moral principles, an Archimedean point, so to speak. We don't usually don't question these principles and if we do, we question very little. It doesn't matter how we come to believe in these core moral beliefs (by reason or by relying on revelation); when we arrive at them, nevertheless, we hold fast to them and we don't modify and discard them haphazardly.

I further suggest that deliberations and methods of acting upon our well-established deontological moral principles are based on consequentialist methods, by which we are free to navigate our lives in an unstable world with stable principles. In this manner of conceptualizing our moral actions, both paradigms seem to be at work, at least in our own mind. I hope to elucidate further through the rest of the paper how terrorists manage their atrocities in this manner. Given the right circumstance, we too, possess the potential to engage in atrocities. The latter conclusion is one of sobering realities of human condition.

Viewing terrorists as psychopaths

Earlier I mentioned that an inclusionary approach in dealing (e.g., scholarly, diplomatic, etc.) with terrorism is more fruitful than an exclusionary one. By inclusionary approach in this paper I mean to bring terrorists under the same tent of humanity, warts and all, assuming that we all function according to the same kind of psycho-epistemological mechanisms: That we all use both absolutist and consequentialist beliefs and approaches to tell our seemingly coherent stories. That we all find flaws and inconsistencies in each other's narratives. That, given the "right" circumstances, we are all capable and susceptible to do good or to do bad, very bad. That is what I mean by inclusionary approach. Exclusionary approach, in contrast would be simplistic

divisions of good and bad: terrorists are bad, evil, monsters, and we are good, virtuous, and angels—exactly the way terrorist view us.

Scholars as well as the public are interested in learning about terrorists' motivation. In this regards it has been easy to engage in hasty generalizations, looking for a single universal explanation. Martha Crenshaw, a leading scholar in the field, considers "a single explanation" approach neither satisfactory, nor useful⁷. Walter Laqueur goes further: "An explanation that attempts to account for all its many manifestations is bound to be either exceedingly vague or altogether wrong."⁸ Similar to the latter worry, it is equally unhelpful to attribute a single characteristic. Walter Reich believes that this kind of causal or characteristic monism is still being done among journalists and some scholars⁹. He contends that terrorism is "carried out by enormously varied range of persons with an enormously varied range of beliefs in order to achieve an enormously varied range of ends."¹⁰

Sweeping generalizations in regards terrorists are bound to be unreliable if not wrong. For example, terrorists from Palestinian territories have been characterized by some scholars as idealist, poor, frustrated young men who want to fill their lives with meaning in a meaningless life of poverty and joblessness. Walter Laqueur, examining such general attributions, claims that there are no such "typical" terrorists and it's a mistake to attribute one-size-fit-all attributions¹¹. Terrorists most likely are not "criminals, Moral imbeciles, or mentally deranged people or sadist (or sado-masochists,)" as some people make them to be¹².

The concept of continuum or spectrum

Scholars who have studied terrorism and terrorists usually admit that most terrorists are "normal", that they are not "suffering from psychotic disorders," or they do not "show any striking psychopathology."¹³ Martha Crenshaw observes that in fact "the outstanding common characteristics of terrorists are their normality."¹⁴ Stereotyping terrorists as psychopaths is unhelpful to scholarship and harmful to possible peaceful negotiation. "Such stereotypes," Crenshaw writes, "are dangerous underestimation of the capabilities of extremist groups."¹⁵ The latter however does not mean that terrorist acts are legitimate or do not deserve a legitimate response, even a harsh but appropriate one at that. Explaining terrorism and its motivation are notoriously difficult. A single, universal definition of the phenomenon almost always falls short of its intended aim.

Aside from the practical and academic reasons there are socio-psychological reasons to place not only the terrorists but also psychopaths and sociopaths on a continuum scale of

⁷ Martha Crenshaw, "The logic of terrorism: Terrorist behavior as a product of strategic choice," p. 41.

⁸ Walter Laqueur, *Terrorism*, p. 133.

⁹ Walter Reich, *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, p. 267.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 261-63.

¹¹ Walter Laqueur, *Terrorism*, p. 174.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 133.

¹³ Jerrold Post, *The Mind of the Terrorist*, p.3-4.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 4.

¹⁵ Martha Crenshaw, "The logic of terrorism: Terrorist behavior as a product of strategic choice," p. 24.

humanity. That is, terrorists and non-terrorists, psychopaths and regular folks occupy the same spectrum at least in the manner by which we reason and morally deliberate. The latter idea does not mean that everyone reasons well. That they reason at all. That is, we all use the same psycho-epistemological mechanisms in varying degree of effectiveness. But the most important realization here is that given the right circumstance we can engage in good and decent acts, or engage in bad and destructive behaviors. It's this human condition that requires us to view terrorists not as a separate species of evil monsters although they do engage in monstrous, heinous acts. The lines of distinction between severe medical cases of psychopathology and the mainstream members of society may seem pretty clear. However, when we account for cultural, political, and myriad of other factors, the distinction may become difficult to make out. In cases of violence in terrorism and wars, as Mark Perry points out, "there is no line between good people and the rest and that, in war, the most honorable causes prove themselves by means that are not honorable. That the bully does not know what he is doing does not excuse the bully."¹⁶ In the same manner criminality "exists along a continuum" and criminal characteristics are also "a matter of degree."¹⁷

The concept of "Terrorist as a monster and an evil doer"

It's natural and even fair to demonize terrorists and their action especially when one is the victim of their atrocities. But ultimately demonization and dehumanization of the terrorists will not be productive in understanding terrorism and hopefully preventing it. Albert Bandura suggests one reason why good and otherwise decent humans become susceptible to unspeakable atrocities given the ripe social and psychological contexts is their ability to disengage morally. He says:

The overall findings from research on the different mechanisms of [terrorist] disengagement corroborate the historical chronicle of human atrocities: it requires conducive social conditions rather than monstrous people to produce heinous deeds. Given appropriate social conditions, decent, ordinary people can be led to extraordinary cruel things.¹⁸

Bandura goes on to argue that in any conflict, viz., wars and "war on terrorism", each side of the conflict lauds and applauds its own courageous efforts but condemns "that of its adversaries as heinous." For example, he mentions that the hijacking of Eastern and Cuban airlines a couple of decades ago, were applauded by the West but not so when Western airlines were hijacked. He further points out that no country in the world totally rejects terrorism. Usually each country or government condemns some acts of terrorism and supports the others.¹⁹ In other word, one country's victim can be another country's victimizer²⁰.

¹⁶ Mark Perry, *Talking to Terrorist: Why America Must Engage With the Enemies*, P. 216.

¹⁷ Stanton Samenow, *Inside Criminal Mind*, pp. xi-xiii.

¹⁸ Albert Bandura, "Mechanisms of moral disengagement", p. 182.

¹⁹ Albert Bandura, "Mechanisms of moral disengagement", pp. 171-72.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 184.

The discrepancy between our moral and sentimental judgments of our own justified actions and those of “the other” is explored by David Hume, a sixteenth century Scottish philosopher in his characteristically graceful writing in his *A Treatise of Human Nature*:

When our own nation is at war with any other, we detest them under the character of cruel, perfidious, unjust and violent: But always esteem ourselves and allies equitable, moderate, and merciful. If the general of our enemies be successful, ‘tis with difficulty we allow him the figure and character of a man. He is a sorcerer: He has a communication with daemon; as is reported to *Oliver Cromwell*, and the Duke of *Luxembourg*: He is bloody-minded, and takes a pleasure in death and destruction. But the success is on our side, our commander has all the opposite good qualities, and is a pattern of virtue, as well as of courage and conduct. His treachery we call policy: His cruelty is an evil inseparable from war. In short, every one of his faults we either endeavour to extenuate, or dignify it with the name of that virtue, which approaches it. ‘Tis evident the same method of thinking runs thro’ common life.’²¹

Hume’s sixteen-century insight still rings true to our modern ear. The pronounced consternation and psychological horror Americans felt as a result of 9/11 moved the Bush Administration to act quickly and decisively. The Administration and Congress’s attempt to empathize with a frightened and angry nation is entirely understandable. The United States’ Congress quickly granted the President the right to “use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attack.”²² This congressional resolution was passed unanimously by the Senate. There were only one dissenting voice in the House, a democrat from California—Congresswoman Barbara Lee. She warned the House that if U.S.’s safety is the primary focus, military action in Middle East may not guaranty it. Echoing Bandura and Hume, Congresswoman Lee declared in the House that “as we act, let us not become the evil we deplore.”²³ Translating her insight into this paper’s terminology, Congresswoman Lee’s statement may be interpreted this way: We have to be aware of our deontological principles and goals and they are worthy; but does our consequentialist means justify us to do what we intend to do? Don’t terrorists whom we deplore and abhor use exactly the same rhetoric and actions as we do to achieve their goals? Does waging war justify the end we seek? And, is this war proportional to the crime committed against us by a renegade group of terrorists? Does the inevitable ensuing collateral damage that will inevitably will occur justify our perceived deontological moral disposition toward Bin Laden and his gang?

²¹David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Understanding*, p. 225.

²² Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, p. 5.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 5.

Selective moral engagement and instrumental rationality

The notion that “one person Jihad is another person’s freedom fighting” is well explored to the point of becoming a cliché. Nevertheless it is a significant phenomenon the significance of which is still not well understood.

Philip Zimbardo believes that psycho-epistemological mechanism of a terrorist act is based on a view he calls “moral disengagement”. According to him moral disengagement is metaphorically similar to a gearshift in a car: When a driver pushes the gear to neutral she disengages the car from accelerating forward no matter how much she pushes on gas pedal. Analogously when a terrorist disengage herself morally, she also disengages herself from responsibility and guilt feeling toward her own moral decision and its actions, no matter how heinous the result. Zimbardo believes that it is easy for humans to morally disengage and that explains why good people do very bad things.²⁴ The latter is similar to psychopath’s moral engagement: A carefully selected “moral exclusion” of the other. Even in case of psychopath the moral judgment, although abhorrent to the rest of us, involves some rational and pragmatic deliberations²⁵. There are, of course, debates about whether psychopaths are rational. But there is little controversy about whether terrorists are rational. Martha Crenshaw contends that “even the most extreme and unusual forms of political behavior [terrorism] can follow an internal strategic logic.”²⁶

Zimbardo’s notion of moral disengagement makes good sense in this way: That humans engage and disengage in rationality, rationalization, and moral deliberation selectively based on various contexts and for various purposes. Bandura noted that “our ability to selectively engage and disengage our moral standards . . . helps explain how people can be barbarically cruel in one moment and compassionate the next.”²⁷ When a terrorist disengages in one area of her moral deliberation, she activates another area to compensate for the disengaged moral item. For example, a terrorist’s disengagement in killing innocent people helps her to shirk off responsibility and guilt feeling for killing and maiming innocent people. But at the same time she activates the larger deontological moral question of justice, better future for her people, doing the God’s work, etc. The latter psycho-epistemological maneuver requires sophistication and complex mechanism for self-delusion while maintaining enough reality to complete a terrorist project. Majority of 9/11 operatives had post high-school education, eight of whom studied engineering²⁸. Walter Reich believes that terrorists do engage in honest-to-goodness rational moral reasoning, not “pseudo-reasoning” as some scholars believe. Reich reports that,

Numerous declarations and memoirs by terrorists going back to the nineteenth century provide rationales for the adoption of terrorist strategies, such as terrorism

²⁴ Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, pp. 3-22.

²⁵ Martha Stout, *The Sociopath Next Door*, pp. 57-58.

²⁶ Martha Crenshaw, “The logic of terrorism: Terrorist behavior as a product of strategic choice,” p. 24.

²⁷ Quoted in Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, p. 18.

²⁸ David Berreby, “Engineering terror: Why are so many extremists from a single profession?”, *New York Magazine*, September 12, 2010.

is an effective revolutionary method, and perhaps the only one, that can be used by a weak force against powerful regime.”²⁹

Terrorists argue that their violent acts are based on one or more major supreme moral or religious principles but the means to achieve their goal has to be a consequentialist means. Among competing moral principles the higher principle trumps the lesser ones. Terrorists would argue that killing innocent people is simply one of those less attractive means. But the gravity of their deontological principles allow them to commit unpleasant acts to achieve the larger moral goals. They say that the latter approach is based on an “emergency ethics.”³⁰ Elsewhere this emergency ethics is characterized by some terrorist, viz., Hizballah terrorists, as the “choice of last resort.” That is, when all other more decent options are exhausted terrorists reach a point that no political, moral, or rational solution is available to them. Hence the violent terrorist act.³¹ It is said that it is in this manner of deliberation that terrorists are distinguished from psychopath.

To be sure, there are criminal or psychopathic elements in a terrorist groups. But it needs to be reiterated here again that most scholars do not consider political and/or religious terrorists as psychopath or criminal. But it is instructive to note that instrumental reasoning is also utilized by all sorts of criminals and psychopaths with great success. Terrorists, criminal, psychopaths, and indeed ordinary people use pragmatic and instrumental reasoning to concoct narratives that give meaning to their deontological moral principles. These personal narratives (in cases of criminals and psychopaths) and group narratives (in cases of terrorists, religious, political, nationalistic, and other cohesive groups) convey our reasoning and rationales for what we stand for and why we do what we do. As examples of the latter point I include below one narrative from a criminal and another, from a psychopath.

In the following account Al Capone complains about not being appreciated when he tries to help people of Chicago: “I am going to St. Petersburg, Florida, tomorrow. Let the worthy people of Chicago get their own liquor the best they can. I am sick of the job—it’s a thankless one and full of grief. I’ve have been spending the last years of my life as a public benefactor.”³² Martha Crenshaw explores the notion of the logic of delusion and claims that even some cases of paranoia has amazingly consistent and logical narrative: “. . .logical structure of the well-organized paranoid is a marvel to behold.”³³

The following account of a psychopath seems inconsistent at the first reading but what he is actually cobbling parts of two consistent narratives. Here is the account an interview of an inmate:

Asked how he had begun his career in crime, [a psychopath] said, “It had to do with my mother, the most beautiful person in the world. She was strong, worked hard to take care of four kids. A beautiful person. I started stealing her jewelry

²⁹ Walter Riech, *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, p. 263.

³⁰ Asad Talal, *On Suicide Bombing*, p. 18.

³¹ Fathali Moghaddam, “The staircase to terrorism: A psychological exploration,” in Bonger, et al, pp. 69-80.

³² Martha Stout, *The Sociopath Next Door*, p. 50.

³³ Martha Crenshaw, “The logic of terrorism: Terrorist behavior as a product of strategic choice,” p. 26.

when I was in fifth grade. You know, I never knew the bitch—we went our separate ways.”³⁴

These kinds of conjoining of conflicting narratives in one single narrative is not an exclusive purview by psychopaths, criminals, children, and terrorists. It is part and parcel of all human intellectual and spiritual storytelling, as a means of justifying their predicaments explaining and recounting their worries, aspirations, and hopes. Holy scriptures of different religions are quintessential repositories of such conflicting narratives. But believers of each denomination find a harmonious narrative well suited to the sentiments and needs of their particular group.

Therefore, finding logical inconsistency may not be the best way to evaluate the complicated terrorist narratives and those of anti-terrorists. Logical consistency would not serve us well here; in fact it prevents us from making progress in understanding and navigating through the labyrinth of complex of terrorists’ narrative.

Martin Kramer’s analysis of “the Moral Logic of Hizballah” points to this combination of consequentialist and deontologist narrative. The deontological principles of Hizballah narrative establishes the “unforgiveable” usurpation of Palestinian land and defilement of Islam. On the other hand Hezbollah’s consequentiality justifications for taking innocent hostages provide them with a consequentialist narrative argument: That the innocent hostages were not innocent after all. They “were guilty of the same transgression against Muslims, and specifically they were spies.”³⁵ Everyone in the West and even in Palestine knows that the spy narrative is disingenuous but it is one way of completing the consequentialist narrative in order to uphold the more important deontological narrative. These disingenuous ploys are employed both by terrorists and by their anti-terrorist counterparts. According to Machiavelli, in warfare, terrorism, and any other political predicament deception and misinformation are considered necessary utilitarian virtues. Leo Strauss called Machiavelli “a teacher of evil”³⁶ but he acknowledged that Machiavelli actually was a patriotic public servant and his narrative of deception was a patriotic narrative after all. Hezbollah’s sloppy “spy” argument is simply one version of their consequentialist narrative in order to achieve their deontological goals. When asked about how can a random Westerner snatched from the streets of Beirut turn out to be a spy, a Hizballah scholar, Husain al-Malawi said, “It is the same as with alcohol. Alcohol is forbidden under Islam, but when it is a medicine, you are allowed to take as much as you need for your recovery.”³⁷ This very clever and honest analogy is a clear example of consequentialist response to a deontological principle, namely the occupation and Western collaboration with Israel. There are a pot porri of arguments and grievances put forward by terrorists and counter-terrorists to

³⁴ Jannette Kennett and Cordelia Fine, “Internalism and the evidence from psychopaths and “acquired sociopath”, p. 177.

³⁵ Martin Kramer, “The moral logic of Hizballah,” p. 150.

³⁶ Leo Strauss, “Machiavelli the immoralist,” in Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, (Translated and edited by Robert Adams), W. W. Norton: New York, 1977, pp. 180-85.

³⁷ Martin Kramer, “The moral logic of Hizballah,” p. 151.

justify their respective atrocities. Some are transparently bogus such the latter spy argument. Some contain genuine and historically corroborated grievances, which are addressed by neither the terrorists nor the counter-terrorists. Some justifications cannot be historically corroborated such the “original instigator argument,” who started the fight³⁸. Other justifications are more controversial but they can end up either genuine or bogus, depending on facts of the matter, such as the “last resort” arguments³⁹.

In short, terrorists’ deontological belief can lead to consequentiality actions of cruelty. Albert Bandura says violence is facilitated or sanctioned by counter-terrorists, giving similar consequentialist reasons, e.g., doing lesser evil to counter or prevent the greater evil. In other words, “[U]tilitarian justifications portray the suffering caused by violent counterattacks as greatly outweighed by the human suffering inflicted by the foe.”⁴⁰ In a similar vein Martha Crenshaw observes that some atrocious terrorist or anti-terrorist behaviors “may be *reasonable* and *calculated* response to circumstances” (my emphasis) when viewed in historical and religious contexts⁴¹. Without entering the debate whether we can categorically reject certain atrocities or categorically sanction others, it’s safe to say that it doesn’t matter what our deontological beliefs are. We are always ready to give elaborate justification and recite heartfelt narrative in support of our own atrocities and cruelties. Asad Talal puts it more simply: “Good arguments (and bad) are available to anyone who wants to justify the conduct of insurgents or soldiers, of armies on the battlefield or of tortures in state detention centers.”⁴²

“No violence without religion; no religion without violence”

Fundamentalism or extremism of any kind—e.g., religious, political, nationalistic, etc.— is the breeding ground for uncompromising deontological concoctions. The uncompromising absolute deontological stance now gaining new popularity, especially in militant Islamist quarters, which put them squarely in opposition to the Western and industrialize secular societies. The militant Islam not only stands in opposition to the Western secular world but also stands again their own more moderate population, which constitutes the vast majority of the Muslim world. By all account, according to Robin Wright, “the rising militant Islam is just one indication that religion . . . will play a greater role” in the future world conflict⁴³. Wright made this rather prophetic claim in early 1980’s, and now her prediction has come to full fruition and even exceeded her own expectation.

However, the new world war between the terrorists and anti-terrorists is escalated by both sides of the conflict. As it is too evident, reprehensible and heinous crimes are being committed

³⁸ Albert Bandura, “Mechanisms of moral disengagement”, pp. 184-85.

³⁹ Martha Crenshaw, “The logic of terrorism: Terrorist behavior as a product of strategic choice,” p. 19.

⁴⁰ Albert Bandura, “Mechanisms of moral disengagement”, p. 164.

⁴¹ Martha Crenshaw, “The logic of terrorism: Terrorist behavior as a product of strategic choice,” p. 10.

⁴² Asad Talal, *On Suicide Bombing*.

⁴³ Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage: The Wrath of Militant Islam*, P. 286.

in the name of religion and God. At the same time much “reprehensible and destructive conducts” committed in the name of stamping out evil of terrorism⁴⁴.

There has been a long-lasting and faithful marriage between religion and violence. They seem like an inseparable couple. At least that is what history suggests, according Hent De Vries. Why such marriage? Where does this affinity come from?

Perhaps, in line with a theme from this paper, the answer may reside in religion’s affinity to embrace too many unexamined and unexaminable deontological, absolutist beliefs. And absolute beliefs may be the culprit De Vries and others are looking for. John Stuart Mill says, “One man’s belief is equal to a thousand with only interest.” Religious deontological moral beliefs carry with them an unparalleled motivation, accompanied by necessary and powerful emotional accessories. It’s in this sense that Hent De Vries observes that “[V]iolence can be seen as the very elements of religion.” If De Vries is right that “no violence without (some) religion; no religion without (some) violence,”⁴⁵ and history is his faithful witness, is there any hope of rehabilitating religions by weaning them away from violence? De Vries gives no such encouragements. He gives a bleak picture of violence-religion marriage. He says that violence in the “widest possible” sense and its “most elemental” sense of the word “finds its prime model—its source, force, and counterforce—in key elements of the tradition called the religion.”⁴⁶

What De Vries is suggesting is in line with what I have called “deontological, absolutist beliefs” in this paper. It is not the case that religions necessarily include violence, say, in their formulation of salvation. But one finds plenty of suggestions of violence in a variety of holy scriptures just the same.

The nature of absolutist thinking and deontological moral belief leads one to a place that violence not only makes sense but is necessary. And these absolutist deontological beliefs cover a wide array of social and private beliefs from political to nationalistic, from Abrahamic religions to lone wolf conspiratorial beliefs. What is required for a group or an individual to translate their belief into violence is simply to believe that:

- a. She possesses a privileged and direct access to truth.
- b. She possesses an excessive amount of uncompromising certitude.
- c. She possesses an ability to disregard intellectual and moral contradiction without intellectual worries or moral guilt.
- d. She attributes an inordinate measure sacredness (uber sacredness) and profaneness (hyper profaneness) about her religious relics and beliefs.
- e. Her ability to raise herself above others and readily demonize and dehumanize those whom she does not agree with her.

⁴⁴ Albert Bandura, “Mechanisms of moral disengagement”, p. 164.

⁴⁵ Hent De Vries, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives From Kant to Derrida*, p. 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 1-2.

- f. An undeserved ownership of her religion only based on her own interpretations of holy scriptures.

The latter unjustified concoction can produce a volatile mix of deep belief and religious and epistemological arrogance, entirely conducive to violence with a ready sense of “displaced responsibility”, namely blaming the victims. The latter can spring from either the uncompromising deontological principles (the enemy must be eliminated), from “following orders”⁴⁷, or by demonizing and dehumanizing the enemy. The uncompromising deontological stance, in short, creates a *cupiditas*—creating an “inner black hole”, which swallows all light, compassion, goodness that most religion can provide, and replace them with self-importance, with privileged access to not only *the* truth, but to God herself⁴⁸.

One of the striking and dangerous byproducts of adhering to uncompromising deontological beliefs by any true believer, religious or secular, is excessive sense of certitude with no sufficient basis. A true believer can become addicted to excessive certitude—the pleasure of knowing her place in the universe with absolute certainty as illusionary prized achievement. When she reaches that ecstatic level of certitude and assuredness, she does not want to give it no matter the price. Skepticism and contradiction become her enemies. Anyone who attempts to question her certitude she will consider apostate or unpatriotic. Hence, you are either with her or you are with her enemies. The latter has been uttered in so many words not only by both President Bush but also by Osama bin Laden to Muslims of the world. In fact bin Laden’s multiple messages clearly argued that the moderate and Westernized Muslims deserve to die just like the westerners because they are not in line with his program. President Bush does not deserve the credit for being the first who uttered those famous words. Sayyid Qutb, the father of Muslim Brotherhood, pronounced Bush’s 2001 declaration in his manifesto, *Milestone*, as early as 1950s⁴⁹.

Excessive certitude emanating from any source—religious, secular, political, or nationalistic—eliminates doubt and any semblance of contradictions in one’s deontological moral beliefs. A true believer who is afflicted with excessive case of certitude needs to feed her addiction with massive doses of selective and willful amnesia on a daily basis in order to remain epistemologically inert or catatonic.

Conclusion

(The following conclusion is made, having only a political terrorist in mind; not a criminal one.) The reader may reasonably conclude that this paper may suggest that there is no fact of the matter whether terrorist acts are reprehensible or whether there is a distinction between atrocities committed by terrorists and those of defensive and rightful retaliatory actions by a victimized government, trying to protect its citizens from senseless and heinous terrorist attacks. The latter

⁴⁷ Albert Bandura, “Mechanisms of moral disengagement”, p. 173.

⁴⁸ Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, p. 4.

⁴⁹ Sayyid Qutb, *Milestone*, Cedar Rapid, IA: The Mother Mosque Foundation, 1964.

criticism and worry is fair and justified. However, the fact of the matter cannot be determined on one side or another in control of the discussion in an exclusionary, closed, isolationary, incestuous atmosphere while emotions running high and raw. This is especially true for the terrorist side of the equation. A terrorized nation can at least find some politicians and citizens who can remain sober in the face of justified anger toward terrorists, attempting to see things impartially. The fact of the matter can only be determined by an impartial third party or country, who is not intoxicated by mindless hatred (in case of terrorists) and is not filled with rightful anger and desire for maximum revenge (in case of terrorized country), and willing to look at all grievances equally and fully based on rigorous historical and scientific investigation. The facts of the matter cannot be determined as long as each party holds on to its mindless deontological, absolutist moral beliefs, and is unwilling to exercise some measure of doubt, skepticism, and epistemic humility. To some readers of this paper, both terrorists and victims of terrorism, my suggestions here seem oxymoronic and even sheer blasphemy. But what would be the sentiments if the impartial investigation reveal to each party involved that its enemy is genuinely listening, examining, and considering its grievances?

References

- Bandura, Albert, "Mechanism of moral disengagement" in Reich, Walter, *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998, pp. 161-91.
- Bereby, David, "Engineering terror: Why are so many extremists from single progression?" *New York Times Magazine*, September 12, 2010.
- Bongar, Bruce, "The psychology of Terrorism" Bruce Bongar, Lisa Brown, Larry Beutler, James Brechengidge, and Philip Zimbardo (eds.) *Psychology of Terrorism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 3-12
- Crenshaw, Martha, "The logic of terrorism: Terrorist behavior as a product of strategic Choice" in Reich, Walter, *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998, pp. 7-24.
- De Vries, Hent, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives From Kant to Derrida*, The John Hopkins Press: Baltimore, 2002.
- Hedges, Chris, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, Anchor Books: New York, 2002.
- Hume, David (Edited by David and Mary Norton), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005.
- Katz, Jack (1988), *Seduction of Crime: Moral and Sensual Attraction in Doing Evil*, New York: Basic Books.

- Kennett, Jannette and Cordilia Fine, “Internalism and the evidence from psychopaths and “ in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Ed.), *Moral Psychology: The Neuroscience of Morality: Emotion, Brain, Disorders, and Development—Volume 3*, The MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 2008, pp. 173-90
- Kramer, Martin, “The moral logic of Hizballah,” in Reich, Walter, *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998, pp. 131-160.
- Laqueur, Walter, *Terrorism*, Little Brown and Company: Boston, 1977.
- Machiavelli, Niccolo, *The Prince* (Translated and Edited by Robert Adams), W. W. Norton: New York, 1977, pp. 80-85.
- Merari, Ariel, “Psychological aspects of suicide bombing” in Bruce Bonger, Lisa Brown, Larry Beutler, James Brechengidge, and Philip Zimbardo (eds.) *Psychology of Terrorism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 101-115
- Moghaddam, Fathali, “The staircase to terrorism: A psychological exploration,” in Bruce Bonger, Lisa Brown, Larry Beutler, James Brechengidge, and Philip Zimbardo (eds.) *Psychology of Terrorism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 69-80.
- Perry, Mark, *Talking to Terrorist: Why America Must Engage With the Enemies*, Basic Books: New Book, 2010.
- Qutb, Sayyid (undated), *Milestones*, Cedar Rapid, IA: The Mother Mosque Foundation, 1964.
- Stanton Samenow, *Inside Criminal Mind*, Crown Publishers: New York, 1984.
- Stout, Martha, *The Sociopath Next Door*, Broadway Books: New York, 2005.
- Talal, Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*, Columbia University Press: New York
- Wright, Robin, *Sacred Rage: The Wrath of Militant Islam*, Simon and Schuster, Inc.: New York, 1986.
- Zimbardo, Philip, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, Random House: New York, 2007.