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THE UNETHICAL RHETORIC OF TERROR*

Terrorism is not an abstract subject matter – at least not for me. My family and me, our friends, the restaurants where we eat, the theaters and museums we visit, the discotheques where we dance, the streets we walk and the buses we ride – all of them have been and are likely to continue to be actual targets of terror attacks. The topic of this lecture, therefore, cannot be for me an academic topic just like any of the many others I talk about.

As I set out to write the n-th draft of this lecture (it was never so difficult for me to write down a lecture!), the news of the November 21st suicide attack in a bus in the Kiryath Menachem neighborhood in western Jerusalem break through the self-imposed walls of my peace of mind. The bus exploded at 7:28 a.m. There is no doubt about the target: children, young girls and boys going to school, eager to learn and to play. Twelve lives – including that of the young suicide bomber – cut down before they were given the chance to blossom. Forty-eight lives scarred forever. The lives of dozens of families disrupted forever. Trauma, fear, and hatred once more got their heavy toll. Calls for vengeance, for more death and horror, are sure to lead to more deaths in an absurd action-reaction dialectics of horror. As long as these voices prevail on both sides, the senseless bloodbath will no doubt continue.

SILENCE OR WORDS?

My first reaction was to shut off the computer and to withdraw to silence. What could I, what could anyone, say in the face of this macabre spectacle? Do any words – other than the expression of absolute disgust, of total, unrestricted and unequivocal condemnation of such an act and of similar ones – make sense? And didn't even such condemnations already become a sort of routine reaction that makes them sound hollow and without effect? Is any analysis, any lecture, any form of discourse about such a monstrosity even permissible? Aren't such analyses rather dangerous, for they may provide some sort of "understanding" of the causes and motives of what was done, which in turn may lead, if not to justifying it, at least to moderating one's rejection of it?

No. I definitely do not want to take part in this game. I ought perhaps simply to express my utter moral refusal to admit this kind of acts by shutting up. I should stand here tonight, with you, in total silence, for a full hour, in memory of these most recent victims, as well as of the hundreds of other victims, of this absolutely immoral expression of human imbecility. Sometimes silent protest is incomparably more powerful than thousands of words. The people of Leipzig demonstrated in 1989 how what begins as silent protest is capable of bringing down mighty walls. But can we be sure our silent protest, here and now, would be correctly interpreted, as it

was in 1989? Can't it be that what we are protesting against is not quite clear for each one of us, and perhaps even quite different if not opposite?

Without the help of words, I confess that I see no way to answer these questions. I happen to believe in the usefulness of words, of discussion, of dialogue, of argument, of understanding. I think the way of dialogue is the only way to stop the bloodshed – in my country, and in any other region where terror has raised its head and is deemed by some people to be a legitimate and efficient means to achieve political ends. I believe that we should make an effort to overcome our instinctive – and justified – repulsion vis-à-vis such actions and to engage in dialogue. We owe this to the victims. We owe this to the would-be future perpetrators, as a last minute effort to divert them from their murderous intentions. We owe it to ourselves in order to know what to do, to decide towards what to address our protest as well as our constructive action.

DEBATING AND MORALITY

The use of words for clarifying our thoughts and for understanding a neighbor or an adversary is not without its dangers. The same words can mean one thing for David and a completely different thing for Ahmed. Words can be truthful, but they can also lie. Argument can serve to widen the gap between the opponents rather than to bring them closer to each other. Debate and criticism can contribute to acknowledging that the opponent has got it right at least on some points, and thereby lead to problem solving; but it can also become a mere eristic exercise of the art of proving that I am absolutely right and my opponent absolutely wrong – an exercise that only leads to the perpetuation of disputes. Although the chances of success are not assured, the risk is nevertheless worthwhile. Not only because talking is the only alternative to violence, but also because the readiness to talk with a person amounts to recognizing that person as a human being, and thus to refusing to de-humanize her. And the de-humanization of the adversary is a well-known strategy of terrorism and of some counter-terrorist measures, as we all know.

Arguing with an opponent is a particularly important form of talking, from this point of view. For, in order to confront successfully the adversary's claims and arguments one must make a serious effort to understand them properly. This means identifying their presuppositions and implications and detecting their eventual theoretical inconsistencies and unacceptable practical consequences. By granting the opponent's arguments their due weight, one *eo ipso* becomes aware of one's own assumptions and discovers their weaknesses. Self-criticism may then lead to the modification of one's position and to stronger counter-argumentation in its support. This whole process forces one to "put oneself in the place of the other", i.e., to see the conflict as the opponent sees it, thus gaining a less self-centered perspective on it. This does not necessarily require *accepting* the opponent's reasons, but it certainly requires *understanding* them *qua* reasons that, in the opponent's eyes at least, lead to the conclusions s/he draws.

The compilers of the Talmud were aware of the importance of the whole process of argumentation and counter-argumentation for the proper understanding of the

conclusion reached. Accordingly, they recorded, in addition to the conclusion, the arguments of both the winner and the loser, in each particular debate. When asked why so much effort should be spent in preserving the winning and losing arguments, when what matters for practical purposes is the conclusion reached, their reply was: *אלה ואלה דברי אלוהים חיים* – “both are the words of the living God”.

In the Talmudic framework, where the topics that were debated concerned legally binding decisions about the daily conduct of life, conclusions had to be reached, and they had to be accepted by winners and losers. In other contexts, argumentation not always leads to compelling decisions. But in the case we are discussing here, can we afford hesitation? After weighing all the arguments, the scales will unequivocally point to the immorality of the deliberate sacrifice of innocent human lives in the altar of political objectives. In fact, I would take this as the hallmark of a morally acceptable argument or assumption: if the argument leads to a conclusion that justifies such a sacrifice, then either its premises are morally unacceptable, or the argument is logically invalid, or both. In this sense, the examination of the arguments, enlightening as it surely is, cannot yield a justification for such acts. Therefore, the purpose of such an examination cannot be (as it often is) the weakening or cancellation of the condemnation through “but” statements of the form “We condemn this act, but we should not forget that *p*” – whatever the content of *p*. They must be examined, rather, in order to clear up the mistakes and other confusing factors that – whether deliberately or involuntarily – may grant such dubious “but” statements an appearance of plausibility.

I have singled out some of these confusing factors by means of contrived or hyphenated expressions such as ‘discommunication’ and ‘pseudo-morality’. I will pursue my analysis by trying to explain these expressions and related ones. Notice that the prefixes I chose function as hedges, which modify the meaning of the noun to which they are attached in the following way: in the cases under analysis, the thing denoted by the modified noun is not in fact what is usually called by that name, although it has some resemblance with what the noun usually denotes. ‘Discommunication’, for instance, refers to something similar in some respects to communication, but lacking some central feature thereof. The task of the analysis is to determine how the phenomenon analyzed – in our case, terrorism – on the one hand resembles human communication and makes deceptive use of this resemblance and, on the other, violates some of its most basic norms. Furthermore, we must inquire what are the moral consequences – if any – of such a violation.

DISCOMMUNICATION: FROM MANIPULATION TO BLOCKING COMMUNICATION OPTIONS

The actions performed in terrorist and counter-terrorist operations are, on the face of it, communicative acts. Through the direct material and human damage they cause, they are supposed to convey certain “messages”, which their respective “addressees” are supposed to interpret and understand, as well as to act upon. Such an “understanding”, in turn, is supposed to be facilitated by a host of other communicative acts, in the strict sense of the word – *communiqués*, warnings,

threats, demands – performed through a variety of channels, such as the media, mediators, overt and covert negotiations, etc. The opponents seem to be, thus, engaged in an ongoing “conversation”, involving a full range of verbal and non-verbal, extremely violent and less violent, communicative acts. This conversation seems even to follow the rules of normal conversation, such as the turn-taking principle and the maxims of cooperation: the interlocutors “speak” each in their turn; each intervention by one of them is followed by a “relevant” response by the other; and special concern for the full intelligibility of the message conveyed is manifest, each side making a point of “speaking” in what it takes to be the “language” best understood by the other (usually, the language of violence) and making its intentions crystal clear.

This semblance of communication, however, breaks down as soon as one scrutinizes it closely. What sets acts of terror radically apart from normal human communication is the way in which they seek to achieve their “communicative” aims. Whereas in communication the addressee’s recognition of the speaker’s communicative intention is what is supposed to lead to his/her change of mind and subsequent behavior, in a terrorist attack this aim is principally achieved by the direct impact the attack has upon the population’s emotions. Overwhelmingly frightened, raging, insecure, disoriented – in short, “terrorized” – the target population is emotionally coerced to react as the perpetrators wish. Under these circumstances, the effort to understand the message and its motivation, the consideration of alternative possible responses, and the other cognitive operations that are routinely performed in a communicative exchange, are paralyzed or overruled by automatic emotional responses. Nothing could be farther from the autonomous, self-conscious, and self-critical partner of a true communicative exchange than the debased and manipulated “interlocutor” of a terrorist attack. On the other extreme, nothing could be farther from that human partner than the cool, disciplined and precise – but no less manipulated – perpetrator of such attacks, be it by using homemade explosives or tanks.

Yigal Brunner is one of the few hundreds of Israeli soldiers who courageously refused to serve in the occupied territories, who refused to become a trigger-squeezing robot. In his letter to the general who summoned him to duty, Yigal begins by quoting Bertold Brecht:

“General, your tank is a powerful vehicle.
It smashes down a forest, it crushes a hundred persons.
But it has one defect.
It needs a driver.”

After describing the dispossession and repression of the Palestinians resulting from the Israeli government’s support of the settlements, and the role of the army in implementing these policies, he writes:

“The tank commander observed a number of persons residing in a suspicious manner in their homes, and ordered the gunner to blast off a round. I’m the gunner. I’m the final small cog in the wheel of this sophisticated war machine. I am the last and least link in the chain of command. I am just supposed to obey orders. To reduce myself to

stimulus-and-response. To hear the command “Fire!” and squeeze the trigger. To burn it into the awareness of every Palestinian. To complete the grand demarche. And do it all with the natural simplicity of a robot who senses nothing beyond the shaking of the tank as the shell is ejected from the gun barrel and flies to its target.”

But – he continues – as Brecht wrote further:

“General, man is very useful
He can fly, and he can kill.
But he has one defect.
He can think.

And so, mon general, I am capable of thought. ... I can see where you’re leading me. I can understand that we shall kill and crush, wound and die, and it will never end. ... Therefore I have to turn down your summons to duty. I won’t come along to squeeze the trigger on your behalf.”

Yigal Brunner exemplifies the small number of individuals who manage to preserve their autonomy and their critical faculties under the enormous social pressures that engender and are engendered by terror and counter-terror. But, regardless of whether it succeeds in curtailing the individual’s autonomy or not, such a coercive and manipulative pressure is morally unacceptable because it runs, of course, against the fundamental ethical principles of individual freedom and responsibility.

Let us consider also other ethical consequences of the ‘discommunication’ effects of terrorism and counter-terrorism. I have coined this term by analogy with the term ‘dysfunctional’, to suggest that acts of terrorism distort and impair communication to such an extent that the basic conditions of its functionality are called into question.

One of the reasons often mentioned by those who resort to terrorism is that there is “no partner”, no one worth communicating with on the “other side”. This assertion’s truth is carefully guaranteed by silencing potential candidates for partners in either camp, and by blocking the communication channels between the two camps. The former is achieved by tagging as ‘collaborators’ those who communicate in any way with “the enemy” and as “traitors” those who denounce their own camp’s atrocities. The latter is achieved by planning the succession of terrorist operations in such a way that communicative channels across the camps are permanently flooded with the noise of explosives and of the emotions they unleash. Each group thus becomes self-enclosed in a circle of solidarity and amen-saying that solidly excludes inner criticism as well as any contact with the other side’s point of view. Discommunication of this kind, coupled with indoctrination and preserved by forceful social pressure, amounts to a sort of mental imprisonment that violates the basic human right of free access to information and freedom of thought.

THE ACTION-REACTION DIALECTICS OF TERROR

Another similarity the cycle of terror displays with a familiar phenomenon is its dialogical or dialectical nature: a terrorist attack is followed by reprisals, which in turn yield further terrorist attacks, which in turn lead to further reprisals, and so on – as if through the voice of the explosions the opponents were making statements, raising objections, rebuking these objections, and so on. I should perhaps make clear that this dialectical semblance is no more than a caricature by using inverted commas around the word ‘dialectics’. In my preferred usage, ‘dialectics’ refers to the art of dialogue practiced by Plato’s Socrates, to the art of grounding reasonable arguments on largely shared opinions, practiced by Aristotle, and to the art of reconciling apparently incompatible positions, practiced by Leibniz. The action-reaction ‘dialectics’ of terror, however, has nothing to do with any of these, for the simple reason that it has hardly anything to do with dialogue and argumentation, just as it displays only a semblance of communication. It is a ‘dialectics’ where the participants are acted upon rather than agents. They are pawns in an action-reaction interplay of forces that seem to be beyond their control, like the laws of nature or the alleged laws of history. Brute causality determines their contribution to this interplay, not free agency. But if this is the case, then there is no room for moral judgment and for the ascription of moral responsibility regarding the acts of the participants in such a dialectics. The terrorist may not *want* to perpetrate his act, but he is persuaded that he is *compelled* to do it, by virtue of the divine order of the world, the absolutely true ideology, or the course of history. As applied to the cogwheels of action and reaction in terror and counter-terror, perhaps it is in the Marxian sense, rather than in the Socratic, Aristotelian and Leibnizian senses, that ‘dialectics’ is the appropriate word.

PSEUDO-MORAL ARGUMENTS

Last but not least, let me turn now to the pseudo-morality characteristic of many – if not all – arguments justifying acts of terror. One of the arguments most often invoked in order to justify such acts consists in pointing out the situation of material and/or cultural dispossession, oppression, humiliation, physical danger, and other grievances of a group of people as the ultimate cause of such acts. These acts are considered morally legitimate because the situation that causes them is unjust and must be redressed, and the ‘balance of power’ between oppressed and oppressor is so asymmetric in favor of the latter that the former have no alternative other than terror to fight their legitimate, injustice-redressing war. It is important, however, to discern the different spheres to which the various components of this argument belong, in order to assess its due weight.

At the factual level, the causal analysis that identifies a particular individual, group, or state as the cause of the grievances listed must be objectively ascertained. It is not unheard of that factors within the dispossessed group are themselves at least partly responsible for the dispossession. Also, the question “who threw the first stone?” may yield endless dispute, as the questions “who is the rightful original owner of this land?” or “who is the victim?” do too. Nevertheless, it is essential to

identify correctly the causes if one wishes to redress their effects without thereby generating similarly unjust effects vis-à-vis another group. Assuming this identification is satisfactorily done, a further factual question arises: what is the most effective way of removing the causes of the situation one wants to redress? This is a typical means-ends rationality issue, which requires a careful comparison of the different possible means (and their predictable effects) to achieve the desired aim without undesirable results. In addition to questions such as whether to use negotiation or military action, whether an all-out revolution would be more effective than a piecemeal improvement policy, etc., one should include in this category the factual question whether the oppressed or dispossessed themselves rather than some third party are the most appropriate candidates to conduct the redressing action.

This last question is related to the 'balance of power' issue mentioned before, as well as to the – also factual question – of whether acts of terror are indeed (a) the only available alternative to redress the injustice and (b) capable of actually achieving this aim. Regarding (a), if a third party's intervention (e.g., the "international community") is a real possibility, then the "only alternative" argument collapses, and with it the factual justification for acts of terror. Regarding (b), if it turns out that acts of terror are rather counter-productive, say, because they rally the oppressor's camp around harder policies, then, again, the justification of these acts dwindles on the basis of mere efficacy considerations, even prior to discussing their moral acceptability. In any case, the moral justification of acts of terror as means of redressing injustice depends upon the demonstration that they indeed are able to do so. Since the argument as usually presented pays little or no attention to this requirement, it fails to provide the moral justification it purports to provide, and therefore is a pseudo-moral argument, catering on the sympathy one naturally feels towards the underdogs.

Turning now to the moral sphere, the first question is, of course, whether warfare is morally justified in the combat against the injustice under consideration. This question lands us squarely at the center of the highly elaborated and hotly debated 'just war' theory. I have no intention to expound or discuss this theory here. Whatever its merits, however, some of its insights are useful for our discussion. Firstly, the theory specifies conditions for the moral assessment not only of waging war but also of the ways of conducting the war. Determining that a war is 'just' does not mean issuing a blank check for the performance of any military or paramilitary action within the framework of the just war in question. In terms of just war theory, therefore, each operation must be morally scrutinized on its own, and it is perfectly possible to view as morally unacceptable certain kinds of operations even if the objectives of the war are morally justified. Acts of terror clearly fall within this category. So that, even if they were to pass all the factual-efficacy tests mentioned above, and even if they were performed as part of a just war, they should not be admitted as morally justifiable acts. To argue that they are, because they allegedly serve the objectives of a just war, is to argue invalidly.

Secondly, it is important to note that the use of the adjective 'just' next to the noun 'war' clearly reveals the presumption of modern thought that war as such is to be avoided, being only permitted under stringent conditions. Morally acceptable

wars are thus exceptional, and should be used only exceptionally, as a last resort. They should not be used if a last minute alternative is found, nor should they be converted into routine or semi-permanent means to deal with conflicts. To argue that because a war is just it ought to be fought is to violate the basic anti-war presumption of just war theory.

Thirdly, the considerations of just war theory, as well as the efficacy-factual analysis employed above, apply also to another argument, adduced particularly in justification of counter-terror operations – the argument invoking the right and duty of self-defense. Here too, it must be borne in mind that (a) the conditions for the exercise of this unquestionable right are quite precise and restricted in scope, (b) the fact that they obtain does not amount to issuing a blank check for indiscriminate operations against all those presumably involved in the conception, planning, preparation, logistic support, execution, and divulgation of the attack, and (c) whenever non-violent alternatives are available, they should be preferred as a means of self-defense. To grant oneself rights and moral legitimacy that one denies the opponent in similar circumstances is no doubt the most worrying example of pseudo-morality one all too often encounters in discussions about terrorism and counter-terrorism. For it is to hide under the mantle of moral judgment a shameless use of double standards to foster one's interests.

CONCLUSION

I have begun this talk in a highly emotional tone, prompted by recent events. I have nevertheless tried to tone down my emotional involvement to a minimum, ending up with a rather dry analytic discussion. Let us not be deluded, however, by the tone of my discussion, for its conclusions are clear-cut and far reaching: the unequivocal condemnation of acts of terror, whatever their provenance, perpetrators, causes, alleged efficacy, and presumed justification. No “buts” toning down this conclusion are allowed.

NOTES

* This is, with minor modifications, the text of my lecture in the Cycle of Conferences “Terror and the War Against It”, organized by Georg Meggle at Leipzig University, delivered on November 26, 2002. The present text does not overlap that of my talk in the colloquium “Ethics of Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism” (Bielefeld, October 2002; org. Georg Meggle).