

Clarifying the Concept of Terrorism: The Misguided Ideal of Academic Neutrality

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The concept of terrorism is in dire need of clarification. The views in philosophy on how to attain this goal differ widely. What adds to the disagreement is that each party accuses the others of fostering a political agenda or begging important moral questions rather than providing academic neutrality. These accusations show that the parties agree at least on one thing: that conceptual clarification should be academically neutral. More specifically, they assume that clarifying the concept of terrorism is a merely conceptual and preparatory step before we address the actual, substantial issues - moral, political or other - and should not be biased towards any substantial assumption. In my paper, I will argue that this ideal of neutrality is misguided. Clarifying the concept of terrorism is inevitably influenced by certain substantial assumptions.

To establish my view, I will suggest that the debate is best reconstructed as one about how to explicate the concept of terrorism in, broadly, the sense of Rudolf Carnap – perhaps somewhat surprisingly given Carnap's notorious rejection of ethical theory. I will focus on two accounts that I take to be representative of two camps in the current debate. Tamar Meisels suggest a definition of terrorism according to which the random murder of non-combatants in the sense of just war theory is the core feature of terrorism. In contrast, Virginia Held treats the instilment of great fear among a wider community as the distinctive feature of terrorism. My reconstruction will lead to the conclusion that the main disagreement is rooted in a different view on what our concept of terrorism should be if we want to productively discuss certain moral issues such as what is wrong with terrorism and whether it is ever justified. More specifically, Meisels and Held mainly disagree on whether we should treat terrorism as a category with

distinctive moral features or as a category that differs from other categories of political violence such as war and political assassination, but not in morally relevant respects.

The second step will be to establish the claim that both camps are committed to the ideal of academic neutrality and to examine this ideal in more detail. Roughly, this ideal amounts to the assumption that conceptual clarification should be done prior to and uninfluenced by any substantial consideration. A popular image can be used to highlight the appeal of this ideal. In conceptual clarification, we sharpen our instruments before we put them to work when reasoning about substantial issues and ideally without thereby distorting the outcome of our reasoning.

The third and last step will be to argue why this ideal of academic neutrality is misguided. This argument runs roughly as follows. The dispute over how to clarify the concept of terrorism is, if I am right, a dispute over how to explicate the concept. In contrast to a conceptual analysis, an explication requires certain substantial decisions such as what theoretical or practical role we want a concept to play and which distinctions are relevant for this role. Therefore, the ideal of neutrality is misguided. Clarifying the concept of terrorism is not a “merely” conceptual issue that can be done prior to and uninfluenced by any substantial assumption. An important part of this last step will be to specify which theoretical and practical issues do or should influence our clarification of the concept of terrorism. I will refer to such guiding substantial assumptions as theoretical and practical agendas.

To close, it is important to note that my conclusion is not as worrying as it might seem since theoretical and practical agendas are open to rational debate. To use the imagery of concepts as instruments again, we do need to sharpen our conceptual instruments in order to enable and improve our reasoning about substantial issues. However, this cannot be done prior to and uninfluenced by any substantial decisions,

namely, decisions regarding the purpose of an instrument. Thus, we do need to sharpen our knife before we can put it to work, but whether we need a serrated or a smooth blade does depend on the purpose. Fortunately, whether a purpose – like cutting vegetables or killing someone – is legitimate is debatable. Hence, the moral of this talk is that we should spend less time worrying about academic neutrality and more time negotiating legitimate agendas.

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