

## TERRORISM AS ETHICAL SINGULARITY

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Virginia Held, in her thoughtful collection of essays *How Terrorism Is Wrong*, explores many facets of the moral significance of terrorism.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most important contribution Held makes is a step toward a more rigorous contextualization of terrorism within the broader spectrum of violence, and in particular within the context of war. This welcome subtlety prompts the discussion of terrorism found in this essay. In particular, I eschew making any axiological or deontic judgments about terrorism and instead attempt to further contextualize terrorist violence within a broad spectrum of human violence by exploring what I take to be the distinctive phenomenology of terrorism.<sup>2</sup>

My thesis is composed of a constellation of claims. First, terrorism is best understood as a spectacle that is read by the targets of the terrorist act as expressing or evincing commitment to what I call *existential values*, which are values that play a central role in constituting a person's identity. Second, the existential values expressed by terrorist acts are experienced by the targets of these acts as what I shall call *ethical singularities*: ethical commitments that are extremely powerful and impossible to assimilate into one's own ethical worldview.

### 2. TERRORISM IS A SPECTACLE

The intractability of debates around something so simple as a widely acceptable stipulated definition of terrorism suggests that it is pointless to attempt to give something akin to a textbook definition of this phenomenon. This is despite the fact that most who have written on terrorism indeed agree about many cases that they are instances of terrorism (e.g., cases such as the 1946 bombing of the King David Hotel by the Irgun; the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing; the 1998 "Real IRA" bombing at Omagh; the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States; and the 2002 bombing of a nightclub in Kuta, Bali, to name just a few cases), even if there remains substantial disagreement about many other cases. This suggests abandoning a "point-fitting" approach to defining terrorism, where a definition

of terrorism is thrown out if it cannot accommodate only one or two of many examples of terrorism.<sup>3</sup> Instead, we ought to attempt to formulate illuminating generalizations about terrorism that may not apply to every case of terrorism that a theorist can find or imagine.<sup>4</sup> We might therefore step back and reflect on terrorism in general, with an eye toward developing a *phenomenology* of terrorism that will in turn help us to understand its ethical significance.

Since terrorist attacks are both violent and public, I begin with the observation that terrorist acts are *spectacles*. But, what kind of spectacle? Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and hurricanes are experienced as loud, disorienting, and highly destructive. Colorful sunsets and huge mountain ranges are experienced as beautiful or sublime. These phenomena capture our gazes: it feels as if they possess our attention, as if we are not free to look away. And when we return our gazes after having looked away, these phenomena once again can strike us as newly gripping. In this way, these phenomena are *spectacles*. “Normal” wartime violence is also loud, disorienting, and highly destructive (I use scare quotes around “normal” because wartime violence ought never to be treated as truly normal). As such, this violence also commands our gaze and so is also a spectacle. The common feature of these spectacles—be they deafening roars, beautiful lights, or colossal mountains—is that they demand our attention in virtue of the brute, overwhelming physical effect they have on our senses: roars block out other sounds, sunsets affect the color of all that we see, and colossal mountains block out our lines of sight and physically block our movements. In virtue of this, let us call such spectacles *physical spectacles*.

Because they are also often physical spectacles, terrorist acts also often have this phenomenology. But, terrorist acts are also spectacles in another important sense: they are what I call *transgressive spectacles*.

Transgressive spectacles are created by the ostentatious transgression of shared rules. Deliberately flaunting the rules of fashion (e.g., showing up at a black-tie affair in jeans and T-shirt) and openly rude behavior (refusing, with a flourish, to shake someone’s hand when offered) can command our gazes simply because they are such flamboyant violations of shared rules. It is, in fact, in the nature of transgressive spectacles that they can easily overcome physical subtlety: the barest hint of underarm hair on a woman will, in communities in which the norm is for women to shave this hair, easily become the focus of viewers’ attentions. Particularly illustrative cases of transgressive spectacles occur in the history of art, since violations of artistic norms are precisely what has given many world-historically significant pieces of art at least some of their artistic and historical significance. For example, the first public performance of Igor Stravinsky’s iconoclastic *The Rite of Spring* in Paris in 1913 eventually erupted into a full-blown riot. This riot was largely a response to the choreography and the lack of classical harmony in the music—that is, the riot was a response to the remarkable transgressive spectacle that was the 1913 performance of *The Rite of Spring*. On the other

hand, contemporary ballets that use the same type of musical score and employ the same sort of choreography may seem to many audiences to be typical, even boring. This is because the contemporary norms of ballet now, at the very least, allow for choreography and music of the sort found in *The Rite of Spring*.

Because transgressive spectacles are spectacles in virtue of being rule-breaking acts, encoded in the spectacle is a message of the rejection of the broken rule. The nature of this “semantics” of transgressive spectacles is crucial. In particular, the content of this message, namely that the creator of the spectacle rejects some norm, does not wholly depend upon the creator of the spectacle intending to send that message (although it does depend upon the creator of the spectacle acting on norms that are inconsistent with the transgressed norm). For, any act can accurately represent to its audience that something is the case in the absence of corresponding intentions in the actor.<sup>5</sup>

This is partially why we can read art or literature so as to decode that the creators had certain values or commitments. For example, we can discern the status of women or the existence and the relative rank of some social classes during a certain epoch simply by studying art created during that period. The artists need not have intended that their pieces represent that in the artists’ society there were norms stipulating that women have a certain status or that there are certain social classes. The art simply *reveals* this about the artists’ society because the artists’ representations have built into them the social order established by the cultural and political norms of the artists’ day. Similarly, transgressive spectacles often reveal that the creator of the spectacle rejects (or simply does not recognize the authority of) the norms that are being transgressed without the actor intending that his transgressive spectacle represent that this is the case.

A corollary of this account of transgressive spectacles is that if one has not accepted the shared rule, then one is immune to the (transgressively) spectacular nature of the transgressive act. Consequently, if no one has, or too few have, accepted the rule, then the act cannot even be a transgressive spectacle. A further corollary of this account of transgressive spectacles is that many physical spectacles (e.g., a car crash at a NASCAR race) will not only fail to be transgressive spectacles, but they will also fail to signify to viewers, who accept the authority of the norms with which the physical spectacle is consistent, that the producer of the spectacle accepts those norms as well. For, it is in the very nature of established, practiced norms that conformity with an established, practiced norm does not call attention to itself *as* conformity with that norm. On the other hand, as viewed from *outside* the established normative framework—that is, from the anthropological perspective—the physical spectacle in conformity with a norm may call attention to itself as a case of norm-conformity. But, for those who are ensconced within an established normative framework, the phenomenology of the physical spectacle will not be the phenomenology of a spectacle of, let us dub it, *norm responsiveness*.<sup>6</sup>

So, on what grounds can one argue that the phenomenology of terrorism, at least from the perspective of the targets, is the phenomenology of a norm transgression? After all, terrorist acts are almost always initially experienced as physical spectacles because they are usually so sensorially overwhelming, so why hold that there not only is an additional important phenomenological feature of terrorism, but also that this is the most important phenomenological feature?

First, terrorist acts are usually experienced as deeply unsettling and life-altering. People sometimes talk about them as “changing everything,” and these acts are sometimes described as barbaric or bewildering. This is different from the phenomenology associated with the experience of “normal” military attacks in the context of an ongoing war, even though such military attacks are often far greater physical spectacles than most terrorist attacks.<sup>7</sup> For, even though these “normal” military attacks are often traumatizing and horrible, they do not inspire in the *physically unaffected* targets the same sense of one’s world having been turned utterly upside down, or of having been confronted by that which is utterly alien and barbaric, as do terrorist attacks. This is not to downplay the trauma of “normal” military violence, but instead to direct attention to how it is distinct from terroristic violence. Furthermore, it is not to say that “normal” military violence cannot be experienced as brutal, raw, and profoundly frightening, but rather that it is sadly experienced as “normal.” This is largely due to the way that wars grind on and, although they never become comfortable, those suffering war’s horrors do often become used to war, in the sense that they adapt by completely adjusting their forms of life in ways that are uniquely suited for living in a war zone. It is distinctive of terrorism that it is experienced as abnormal—that is, as upsetting to one’s form of life.

Second, while particularly large terrorist acts can be experienced by all as physical spectacles, only the *targets* of terrorist acts (and those who share with the targets the same transgressed norms) experience these violent acts as transgressive spectacles. The terrorist and his sympathizers do not experience the violent act as transgressing *their* norms, even if they know the violent act transgresses some norms, namely the norms accepted by their targets. Consequently, the terrorist and his sympathizers do not experience the terrorist act as a transgressive spectacle. We have ample evidence for this: terrorists and terrorist sympathizers usually justify their actions by appeal to norms to which they are committed. Thus, terrorist actors reject the moniker “terrorist” (as it is usually non-ironically deployed) and reject the description of their actions as “terrorism,” while the targets of the violent act are dumbfounded at what they see as terrorists’ refusal to accept that their action is transgressive.<sup>8</sup>

These two considerations strongly suggest that terrorism is best understood not primarily as a physical spectacle but instead as a transgressive spectacle. This becomes especially clear when we consider cases of terrorism that conspicuously lack massive physical spectacle. In such cases, one well-choreographed act, as

occurred during the 1985 hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* when a single wheelchair-bound man was shot in the head and then dumped into the ocean for all to see, can have the same power as a transgressive spectacle as would a bomb blast in a hotel lobby. The reason why is that this single violent act is self-consciously enacted as a *performance* for the targets to consume, with the full knowledge that its spectacular nature depends entirely upon the violence being experienced by an audience as a performance of norm-transgression.<sup>9</sup>

This final consideration—that a violent act that *lacks* many characteristics of physical spectacles can still be terroristic—and the two phenomenological features of terrorism mentioned above strongly suggest that we ought to understand terrorism primarily as a transgressive spectacle.

### 3. SHARED NORMS OF WAR

What are the shared norms that terrorist actors violate in order to create the transgressive spectacle? Here we may temporarily return to definitions of terrorism and learn from them. These definitions typically take terrorists both (i) to target illegitimate targets—noncombatants, soldiers who do not pose a threat, and so on—and (ii) to initiate violence in an illegitimate manner: they are improper actors on the world stage, they have not secured appropriate dispensation from relevant juridical-political bodies, and so on. Some definitions focus on the first criterion (and with varying accounts of what makes someone an illegitimate target), others on the second, and some on both. But, in every definition, terrorism is defined *in opposition to* the standing norms of war. For, the standing norms of war are what distinguish combatants from noncombatants, and legitimate actors from illegitimate actors. Apparently, then, there is widespread agreement that terrorism involves *some* kind of violation of standing norms of war—even if there is some disagreement about which violation is a defining feature of terrorism. In this way, my account of terrorism, as a transgressive spectacle in which the standing norms of war are what are transgressed, is not only consistent with many of the standard definitions of terrorism, but it also *explains* both a common feature of these definitions—namely, their focus on norms of war as opposed to other moral and political norms—and a common locus of debate around the definition of terrorism—namely, the attention paid to which norms of war the violation of which is the distinctive feature of terrorism. So, we have very good reason to hold that terrorism is a transgressive spectacle in which the norms transgressed are certain standing norms of war.

It is important at this stage to recognize the contingency of these norms of war, and in particular their dependence upon practice. For, it is precisely their dependence upon practice that gives the transgression of these norms their spectacularity: if the targets did not experience the norms as, in some way, realized in the thick fabric of their lives, then a performance of their transgression would

not capture the gazes of the targets. So, why accept that the norms of war both are contingent and are dependent upon practice? That is, why accept that the norms of war are neither valid independently of practice identity nor *a priori* discernable? First, the norms of war have changed over time, which is not something we would expect of norms that are *a priori* discernable or whose validity is independent of practice. Second, the norms of war at least *appear* to be established through bi- and multilateral negotiations (and appear to be subject to revision at any point by the involved parties). So, even if, counterfactually, there were an independent fact of the matter about what the content of these norms are, much of *that* content is apparently utterly inscrutable, and therefore the publicly accessible content—and the content that will guide behavior—must be fixed through social practice. Hence, the evidence strongly suggests that the norms of war are contingent and dependent upon practice.<sup>10</sup> That is, the content of the norms of war is fixed by whatever norms are shared by the parties in conflict, where the sharing of norms can be understood in a variety of more- or less-strict ways, but always in ways that take some public, practical acknowledgement of the norms as central. And, it is this practice-based acceptance of the norms that makes the transgressive spectacle possible.

A phenomenologically striking feature of these shared rules of war is that committed parties experience them as transhistorically and universally binding even though they are products of contingent arrangements. That is, the rules are experienced as having properties they do not have: the rules are experienced by the committed parties as binding in their own right, not as binding because the parties have bound themselves to them. But, in fact, the rules are binding precisely because they have been agreed to and precisely because they are practiced. This agreement therefore must be followed by a second stage, namely, the internalization of the rules by subjects, which thereby gives the rules the appearance of being self-authorizing.<sup>11</sup> This internalization is crucial to the capacity of the violation of the rule to manifest as a spectacle.<sup>12</sup>

Some might object at this point that terrorist targets do not, in the appropriate sense, share the norms of war. For, norms of war are accepted or internalized by leaders and their soldiers, not by civilians. One of the most horrible feature of terrorism, then, is that it targets the very people who are excluded from having to live with such norms on their mind—that is, it targets the very people who are not leaders or soldiers, and not only harms them physically, but also forces them to think as if they are at war, thereby yanking them out of the idyll of peace. Thus, terrorism cannot be a transgressive spectacle in virtue of having violated shared norms of *war*. If terrorism is a transgressive spectacle at all, it is because the violated norms are run-of-the-mill social norms practiced by civilians.

This objection presumes that wartime ideologies are not recapitulated throughout their societies. But, this is false. The norms of war, in particular, to which we are committed are represented and enacted within popular culture in extremely

subtle ways, thereby shaping susceptible people's practical attitudes. For example, norms of war are straightforwardly taught to populations through popular legends about both heroic action and infamy, and they are regularly deployed in popular rhetoric when politicians are attempting to make cases for military action. Most significantly, these norms are represented throughout mass media. For example, in the United States, the stories of the American Revolution; the representations of westward expansion and wars with indigenous peoples; and the ubiquitous photographs, movies, and re-enactments of the Civil War, the Pearl Harbor attacks, and the My Lai massacre all have a place in contemporary popular culture, cementing a fairly determinate set of norms of war in Americans' attitudes. In general, because martial posturing and stories about war play central roles in the politico-social order, we should be shocked to find the absence of acceptance of norms of war in the general population.

Let us take stock. I have argued, through an exploration of the phenomenology of terrorism, that terrorism is best understood as a transgressive spectacle and that the norms transgressed are norms of war that members of the target community have internalized and experience as being self-authorizing and having universal normative force (even though they are not). This conclusion invites certain objections. Let us consider them and try to defuse them.

*Objection One:* This account does not provide universal grounds for the definitive identification of an act as terrorism: terrorism is quite literally in the eye of the beholder. This would seem to invite a kind of moral relativism—an acceptance that, for example, the attacks of September 11, 2001, were in fact legitimate because, in the eyes of some beholders, the attacks were not terroristic because they met the standards of the norms of war to which at least some parties are committed. But, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, are obviously morally repugnant. So, it cannot be the case that whether something is terroristic depends upon the actual psychological states of whomever is counted as the audience of the attacks.

This objection depends upon too flat-footed a reading of the issues at stake in terrorist violence. I have argued elsewhere that there are independent reasons to value the existence of shared rules of war and the trust that practice of these rules engenders, and that terrorism, understood exactly as the transgressive spectacle I have described here, is morally objectionable because it lethally threatens both the shared rules and the concomitant trust.<sup>13</sup> Thus, terrorism-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder is *pro tanto* morally impermissible if the beholder is a member of a community that shares standing international norms of war. In short, even if terrorism is in the eye of the beholder, there may still be a morally objectionable offense *regardless* of the other available perspectives from which to view the terrorist attack.

*Objection Two:* This gloss on terrorism suggests that what was once terrorism can, through repetition, cease to be terrorism. For, as norm transgressions

increase in frequency, they, at the very least, cease to be spectacles, and they probably cease to be transgressive to boot! This is due to the fact that repeated transgressions can threaten the hold of the transgressed norm on the parties who have internalized the norm, thereby making future transgressions of the norm begin to appear normal, thereby eliminating the spectacle of the transgression and, eventually, perhaps even eliminating the practice of the norm. This, though, is surely absurd: terrorists cannot make their actions *less* terroristic simply by being particularly effective and diligent terrorists!

This objection also fails. Effective and diligent deployment of a terroristic tactic can diminish its terroristic character. The motivation for holding on to a fixed extension of the term “terrorism” is the desire to reserve use of the term “terrorism” as a particularly strident form of moral disapprobation directed at one’s enemies of the moment. And this requires that our sense of moral disapprobation should remain stable across fluctuation of the frequency of the use of some tactic so long as it is our enemy who is using this tactic. But this is not what happens. The regularization of a tactic easily moves it from the column of objectionable to the column of mere military tactic. This is especially striking when states begin regularly violating traditional norms of war. The initial bombings of civilians by the Nazis were seen as the greatest of atrocities because they were such sudden departures from the norms of war that had characterized even the mass slaughter of World War I. But by 1944, the German attacks on London were remarkable only if they resulted in particularly serious devastation. They had lost their capacity to be transgressive spectacles. Why is this so? By these points in the war, such horrid actions were commonplace. The death of civilians became the norm, and hence a norm prohibiting killing civilians ceased to be practiced. The possibility for a *transgressive* spectacle faded, even though these acts continued to be brutal and horrible physical spectacles. More recently, in Iraq, an attack being a suicide bombing was sufficient to make that attack an act of terrorism. After more than six years of regular suicide bombings, though, the public has become less prone to see such attacks as terroristic and more prone to see them as brutal and sadly normal tactics employed by an entrenched insurgency. We can conclude that effective and diligent deployment of a terroristic tactic *can* diminish its terroristic character.

*Objection Three:* On this account of terrorism, there cannot be terrorism when there are no norms governing war. But, there is terrorism even when there are no norms governing war. Therefore, this account fails.

This final objection is little more than foot-stamping. Some reason must be given for positing the existence of a phenomenon in contexts in which there is no evidence that this phenomenon exists. As argued above, there is a sad history of horrid actions that were once terrorism coming to be seen as “normal” war tactics. Furthermore, accounts of terrorism put forward by those who might wish to avoid the dependence of terrorism on the existence of norms of war usually

appeal in their definitions of terrorism directly to norms of war, and in particular to norms governing who is and is not a legitimate war maker (i.e., which actors may legitimately fight wars) and who is and is not a combatant. But if these norms do not exist, then even according to these accounts, terrorism cannot exist in the absence of fixed norms of war.

I conclude, at this stage, that terrorism is best understood as a transgressive spectacle in which the norms transgressed are the norms of war shared by the target population, and in particular, norms governing the legitimacy of starting a war and the distinction between combatants and noncombatants.

#### 4. EXISTENTIAL VALUES

So far, my argument suggests that the message of the terrorist act is purely negative: “We do not share these norms.” But this would be too simple. The transgressive spectacle is not merely a negative act—that is, an act of rejection. It is also a positive act, in the sense that it expresses a positive commitment to a certain set of values. But how could the targets of the terrorist act discern what those values are? It is easy to tell that someone does not accept a norm—they simply do not follow it—but it is quite difficult to discern what norms someone accepts, since any piece of behavior is consistent with an almost infinite number of norms (even while it is also inconsistent with at least one norm).<sup>14</sup>

This sort of worry should not be taken too seriously, though. For, at least in the case of terrorist violence, it is clear that the terrorists are committed to norms that allow the use of deadly violence against certain people, namely, their targets, for the sake of some end. So, what the targets of terrorist violence experience, then, is that the terrorists are committed to norms that identify them as legitimate targets of deadly violence. Furthermore, terrorists often risk and sometimes end their own lives for the sake of killing their targets (in order to achieve some further end). Consequently, the targets of terrorist violence experience the terrorists as being so committed to certain values that they will not only kill for them, but they will also *die* for them.

Values for which people will kill and sacrifice themselves are clearly extremely important. They are part of a class of values that altogether provide the frame for lived experience by both shaping the boundaries of our affective experiences and our unconscious relations with others and the sensual, and setting the limits of our senses of the Good and the Right. Thus, these are the values that define the limits of how “reality” can strike us, in the form of apparently spontaneous experience, as morally odious or morally praiseworthy. That infanticide is a moral abomination, for example, might be among a person’s existential values, and therefore a scene of infanticide would strike that person as morally odious on its face. No genuine further questioning of its moral status would be acceptable without crisis or philosophical disengagement. But, existential values not

only determine the limits of what could be at stake but also determine what *is* ultimately at stake for a subject in both her daily activities and life in general. For example, that success in one's profession is a profound good might be an existential value, and therefore one's proximate and longer-term ends must cohere with the demand of this value. So, existential values, in sum, are those values that limn the boundaries of our practical identities and those values in virtue of which life appears to be worth living.

Existential values are those values acting against that which is, in Bernard Williams's language, "unthinkable," or in Harry Frankfurt's language, "impossible," where these notions are meant to pick out the *volitionally* unthinkable or impossible.<sup>15</sup> Frankfurt, for example, describes an account of the will and the self that has, at its core, the concept of a volitional necessity. Roughly, volitional necessities are, according to Frankfurt, brute limits on the capacity to identify with one's desires as motivationally effective. Identification, in turn, is the acceptance of some desire as motivationally effective—that is, acceptance of some desire as the desire that will move one to act. When one accepts some desire as motivationally effective, one thereby takes that desire as one's own, and so identifies with the desire and the concomitant action that, if everything is working correctly, flows from that desire. In Frankfurt's language, this is also what it is to *care* about something: what one cares about is the object of the desire with which one identifies. In cases where one identifies with a desire *wholeheartedly*—where one cares wholeheartedly about something—one is reflectively satisfied in the sense that there is nothing else one cares about that conflicts with identifying with that desire (i.e., there are no *other* desires with which one identifies that conflict with that desire). In this way, volitional necessities non-accidentally limn the boundaries of the motivational territory with which one wholeheartedly identifies and thereby, according to Frankfurt, at least partially compose what we might call one's self.

Identification, it should be emphasized, does not require evaluation of some higher-order attitude toward a desire. Frankfurt instead describes identification variably as treating something as important or as accepting it. Regardless of how we make sense of treating a desire as important or of accepting some desire, Frankfurt's notion of identification is definitely entirely a matter of attitudes that essentially have *motivational* potency as opposed to attitudes that essentially are merely epistemic. In other words, the identification relationship is between different attitudes whose defining functions are cached out in motivational terms, namely desires and other "passions" and *not* beliefs or "ideas." This careful restriction to the "passions" is not an accident, either. For Frankfurt is caching out a kind of hierarchical endorsement of desires that is meant to be the analogue of a kind of Cartesian epistemic certainty, which is something like reflective satisfaction with a belief—a satisfaction that "resounds" throughout the entire system of beliefs.<sup>16</sup> That is, the epistemic analogue of a volition with which one

wholeheartedly identifies is a belief about which one is certain, or, to put it in familiar Cartesian terms, a belief that is clear and distinct.

Let us also consider Bernard Williams's discussion of a moral incapacity or the unthinkable: Williams notices that there are some things that we just cannot do. For example, most people just cannot kill innocent people for fun. The reason why is not that they would be overwhelmed by disgust if they tried, but that they could not even try because they could not *decide*, with the appropriate intention being generated, to kill innocent people for fun. What is behind this incapacity is the commitment to "totally decisive considerations" that yield "the conclusion that I cannot do it."<sup>17</sup>

Let us call these limiting and defining values—these values for which, in some cases, people will kill and die—*existential values*. My claim is that terrorist violence appears to its targets not merely as expressing the rejection of certain norms but as *expressing or evincing commitment to certain existential values*. That is, for its targets, terrorist violence has the phenomenology of an expression of the terrorist's highest and most powerful values and, in particular, of values for which the terrorist will kill and, often, die. The particular content of the terrorist's existential values does not matter—in fact, it may remain utterly opaque. What does matter is that the terrorist's targets will see the terrorist as being committed to values that are, if anything, inconsistent with the target's continued existence. It appears as if the terrorist reasons thus: this value, V, which is the highest value to which I am committed, can only be realized through the killing of those people, and since there are no other values or norms trumping the demands of V, and in particular no values or norms prohibiting the killing of those sorts of people in the service of V, then I must kill those people in the service of V.

## 5. ETHICAL SINGULARITIES

Existential values are commonplace: warriors have long died for the sake of honor, soldiers go on suicide missions for the sake of their comrades and their country, some doctors—like the doctors who work for Médecins Sans Frontières—risk their lives sake of the health of the most needy, many activists—like the murdered Civil Rights workers James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman—die for the sake of their cause, and, most notably, there is a long history of religious martyrs who chose horrible deaths for the sake of their religious values. Terrorists, especially terrorists who are suicide attackers, are only one amongst many who are moved to extreme action by an unhappy confluence of existential values and circumstances. (Fortunately, most of us never find ourselves in such a situation because most of us are never in conditions that call for killing or dying for our existential values).

Because terrorist acts are transgressive spectacles and carry a message of rejection of the target's values and commitment to certain existential values, the

terrorist's target does not experience the existential values expressed by the terrorist act as familiar or even as easily translatable into her own values. For, we are assuming that the target is experiencing the violence as terroristic violence, so if the target *did* experience the existential values as familiar or translatable, then she would not experience the terrorist act as a *transgressive* spectacle—she would not experience it as a terroristic act. For, if the target in some sense identifies with the existential values expressed by the terrorist act, then while the target might see the violent act as an unacceptably rash or confused expression of shared values, she will nonetheless *not* experience the terrorist act as *violating* the relevant moral norms. But, *ex hypothesi*, targets of terrorist violence *do* experience terrorism as a transgressive spectacle (i.e., most do not see the terrorist act merely as the product of a miscalculation). It follows that the values evinced by the terrorist act appear to targets to be radically alien existential values. That is, the terrorist act appears to be evidence of a radical disagreement in existential values between the terrorist and the target. Terrorist violence is therefore experienced not as some errant deviation from the possibly familiar values but instead as an expression of the *mysterious*. We ask ourselves, not really expecting an answer, “What could motivate normal people to do such a thing?” We wonder if they have been driven insane by some injustice or poisonous religious doctrine. Some even rush to the familiar and unimaginative language of evil. By doing this, they attempt to domesticate the terrorist by seeing him as part of a familiar Manichean order—as playing almost a scripted role in the familiar battle of Good vs. Evil. But this is absurd: terrorists are no more pawns of some sentient, hypostasized evil than are any other human beings who use lethal violence to achieve their moral and political ends. Treating terrorists in this way is just an attempt to remove the mystery from the terrorist act—to domesticate the terrorist's demand for the conformity to utterly alien existential values. The phenomenology of terrorism is therefore not solely the phenomenology of the fear of physical annihilation, although that fear is certainly present. Rather, the phenomenology of terrorism is the phenomenology of the fear of *moral annihilation*: the terrorist is using violence to replace the practice of familiar values with utterly alien values. The terrorist act does not appear to be part of the familiar Manichean order; it appears to be a *threat* to the familiar Manichean order or to any familiar moral system.

Let us dub the terrorist's values expressed by the terrorist act and as experienced by the targets *ethical singularities*: values so totalizing and so alien that they cannot be translated or fit into one's own moral system, and, because they appear to be systematic, values whose “gravitational pull” threatens one's own moral system. Insofar as the terrorist act is decoded as an expression of an ethical singularity, then, it is a raw, unmediated, and clear public expression of total commitment to, and a demand to capitulate to, a foreign moral system.<sup>18</sup>

This explains why terrorists appear to their targets to be beyond peace. We

cannot make peace with those for whom the only *attractive* peace would involve the destruction of our own moral order. For, how could there be peace when terrorists are clearly willing to die for their existential values, which are utterly at odds with our own cherished values? In fact, for *both* the terrorist and the target, it seems pointless to voice their points of view to one another: each side appears to be horrendously and blasphemously wrong. Even to accept the other as an equal in respectful discourse would be a violation of one's own existential values, and to be forced to engage in such discourse as a result of the demands of a more powerful political or juridical order would be experienced as the height of oppression—a further injustice against which to struggle. At the outset, then, there appears no possible mediation of the two sets of values, since they cannot be integrated with one another without some sort of capitulatory abandonment or denial of the transcendence of one's own values.

I conclude, then, that terrorism is best understood as a transgressive spectacle expressing commitment to existential values and that these spectacles are experienced by targets of the violence as expressions of ethical singularities.

Before turning to an objection, let us consider two important observations.

First, while to some targets, it may appear that their terrorist attackers sacrifice all moral and humanitarian values for the sake of some political end, it would be a mistake to conclude that terrorists in fact are sacrificing their values. The terrorist is enacting the most heightened expression of morality possible for him: to die and to kill for what one believes in is an ethical act, regardless of whether one's spectators or one's targets see it as such.<sup>19</sup> The terrorist simply does not appear to be moral from the perspective of the target because the terrorist is enacting a commitment to an *ethical singularity*, which is the very sort of moral commitment that is unassimilable into the spectator's or target's moral system and hence unrecognizable as moral from their perspectives.

Second, we must recall that the very possibility of terrorist violence depends upon the targets of the violence being committed to certain norms of war. In the absence of such norms, or if the norms allow for the targeting of the very people whom the terrorists target, then the violent act will not be a transgressive spectacle and so will not be terroristic. The violence might still be experienced as the expression of an ethical singularity and so might still be utterly terrifying. But, such violence would probably have to take a far more physically spectacular form than the normal terroristic violence, which so far has been rather small-bore in comparison with the obscene levels of "normal" violence in war. A terrorist merely needs to kill twenty people with a bomb to create the fear of moral annihilation. To achieve this affect under conditions of "normal" war, the violence needs to suggest that the enemy's army is ready and able to utterly devastate the entire targeted community. Otherwise, the military act of violence is not experienced as an existential threat to one's dearest values.

## 6. AN OBJECTION

One might point out that terrorists often pursue fairly plain-Jane nationalistic projects. In particular, the view is that terrorist violence expresses only a commitment to the expulsion of foreigners from one's national territory.<sup>20</sup> What could be more familiar than this set of values? According to this objection, terrorist violence may be an expression of existential values, but it cannot be experienced by targets as expressing an ethical singularity. It is instead experienced as expressing a commitment to perfectly familiar values with which targets just happen not to agree.

This argument fails. The value of having a "homeland" free of a certain kind of foreigner appears widely shared only because it is presented in the objection without any determinate content. Once the content is filled out, this value is a prime candidate for being an ethical singularity. For, the value of having a pure homeland does not only reference particular parcels of land. It also fixes conditions governing who is a native and who is a foreigner and what is pure and what is profane. Such values can be untranslatable into an opposing set of values. For, from the perspective of the person who lives in some territory and identifies either with the land itself or with her status as a legitimate occupant of that territory, values suggesting that her mere existence is profane are clearly utterly alien. That is, for those who see their presence in the land as consistent with or even required by their own values, others' existential values entailing that their presence is obscenely and blasphemously wrong are experienced as ethical singularities.

For example, that a Jew might take it to be morally appropriate—even morally *required*—to live in Hebron is enough to make the Palestinians' moral revulsion at his presence appear to be nothing short of incoherent. The Jewish Hebron resident cannot understand the Palestinians' values. She might even see the Palestinian moral revulsion as evil. And, of course, the same is true from the perspective of the Palestinian. This is why negotiation may seem impossible: merely *talking* to the other will appear to be a capitulation to evil.

I conclude, then, that violence in the service of patriotic and nationalistic values can, at least some of the time, be experienced as an expression of an ethical singularity.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Terrorism is a violent act in transgression of certain shared norms of war. Such acts also constitute performances expressing both the rejection of certain values and the commitment to existential values that the targets of the violence experience as ethical singularities. Ethical singularities are totalizing in that they are entirely inconsistent with the core values to which the targets of the violence are

committed. Ethical singularities therefore are experienced as threats to targets' core values. Thus, terrorism is experienced as the threat of moral annihilation.

This account of terrorism has several virtues, not least of which is that it explains why terrorists do not see themselves as terrorists but instead see their opponents as deeply threatening. For, both see the other as committed to ethical singularities, and so both will likely see the violence committed by the other as terroristic. Furthermore, this account explains how it is that a relatively small act of violence can so colonize the imaginations and fears of the targets of the violence. Finally, it can explain why terrorism seems to require a fairly robust stable background of norms of war. Where there is sheer chaos, there can be no spectacle so delicately calibrated to unsettle as terrorism is. There can be instead only brutal and horrendous violence, which is itself unsettling, but not in the same way that terrorism is.

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## NOTES

I thank an audience at Vassar College for their questions and comments on material that is included in this essay. I thank Thomas Donahue for organizing the session to discuss Virginia Held's book and Robert Talisse for organizing the issue of *Public Affairs Quarterly* on Virginia Held's work. Finally, I thank Virginia Held for her subtle and insightful discussions of terrorism—discussions that I find to be the finest in Anglophone philosophy.

1. Virginia Held, *How Terrorism Is Wrong* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

2. This approach is not entirely unique in analytic philosophy. See Annette Baier, "Violent Demonstrations," in *Violence, Terrorism and Justice*, eds. R. G. Frey and Christopher Morris (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 33–58; and Matthew Noah Smith, "Terrorism, Shared Rules and Trust," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2008), pp. 201–221.

3. Held is as guilty as the rest of this. For example, she often uses the single example of the 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut to argue that if *that* is terrorism, then targeting civilians, the innocent, and so on cannot be part of any definition of terrorism.

4. For a (literally) bewildering cascade of imagined cases of terrorism, see Frances Kamm, "Terrorism and Several Moral Distinctions," *Legal Theory*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2006), pp. 19–69.

5. In this way, the meaning of a terrorist act that concerns me here—namely, that the terrorist rejects certain shared norms—can be a case of Gricean natural meaning. But this is not necessarily the case: it may be that among the propositions that the terrorist intends to express through his act is the proposition that he rejects certain norms shared by the members of the targeted population. In such circumstances, the terrorist act has Gricean nonnatural meaning.

6. There can be cases of conspicuous norm conformity where the message of the action is that the actor is conforming with such-and-such a norm. But these are not typical.

7. I put initial military attacks into a different category, as I believe that these *are* experienced as transgressive spectacles, which in turn partially explains the unique moral seriousness of both initiating violence and responding with violence. This is borne out by the way we fixate on initial attacks as particularly infamous even if, in sheer size, these attacks are rather less substantial in comparison with later battles, at least with respect to death and destruction.

8. The terrorist can see that his terrorist act is transgressive without experiencing it as such, simply by knowing that his act transgresses the norms of the targets. But, this just reveals a kind of anthropologist's perspective on the part of the terrorist—that is, a phenomenological distance from the experiential position of the targets of the terrorist act.

9. This publicity and performativity of terrorism is another of its hallmarks, and it is what makes terrorist violence stand out in a way that deeply affects not only the victims and their family and friends, but all those in the community (and perhaps beyond) who take themselves to be bound by the shared rules transgressed by the terrorists. That is, this publicity and performativity is what allows terrorist violence to command the gaze of a community whose members never experienced the physical spectacle of the violence.

10. This is obviously not a conclusive demonstration. For an extended defense of the claim that, at the very least, norms governing who is and is not a combatant are conventional norms; see George Mavrodes, "Conventions and the Morality of War"; and Lawrence Alexander, "Self-Defense and the Killing of Non-Combatants": both in *International Ethics*, eds. Charles Beitz et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 75–89 and 98–107, respectively. Note also that the position I (and Mavrodes and Alexander) describe is consistent with the claim that it is *a priori* discernable that we are obligated to establish norms of war, and in particular, norms of war that govern when it is legitimate to go to war and who is a legitimate target.

11. See Allen Gibbard's discussion of internalized and accepted norms in Allen Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 68–82.

12. This is not to say that a cynic cannot recognize the contingent character of these norms and hence see their normative significance as dependent upon agreement. But, this cynic, if she was thoroughly cynical, would not experience the terrorist act as a transgressive spectacle and therefore would not experience the terrorist act as *terrorism*. She might cognize it as such, but that is a radically different phenomenon than experiencing it as such; one can know that the Müller-Lyre illusion is an illusion, and yet one will still experience the arrows as having different lengths.

13. See Smith, "Terrorism, Shared Rules," pp. 39–43.

14. See Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

15. For Williams, see Bernard Williams and J. J. C. Smart, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 92–93; and Bernard Williams, "Moral Incapacity," in *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 46–55. For Frankfurt, see, generally, Harry G. Frankfurt,

*The Importance of What We Care About* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and Harry G. Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

16. I take this insight from Barbara Herman's excellent discussion of Frankfurt's account of volitional necessities in Barbara Herman, "Bootstrapping" in *Contours of Agency*, eds. Sarah Buss and Lee Overton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 253–274.

17. Williams, "Moral Incapacity," p. 51.

18. Existential values are not context-dependent: so long as Mr. A does not change, his existential values remain constant in all contexts and from all perspectives. Ethical singularities, on the other hand, are always relative: Mr. A is committed to an ethical singularity only from the perspective of Mr. B, because Mr. B's existential values are utterly incommensurable with—that is, they entirely resist mediation with—Mr. A's existential values. Thus, if everyone's existential values were intertranslatable, there would be no cases of ethical singularities, since all existing existential values would be understandable as not totally alien from all existing moral perspectives. That is, each existing existential value would be assimilable into every other moral system with different existential values. This, though, is not the case in modernity: both despite and because of the normalizing force of capitalism, human beings regularly confront utterly unfamiliar and unassimilable existential values and, importantly, experience these values as coercively imposed upon them. Hence, the road is paved for a particularly robust form of existential moral conflict.

19. Thus, even if Jesus's crucifixion could have been seen by some of his contemporaries as a pointless death for the sake of fringe values, it would nonetheless have been a kind of "ethical terrorism": Jesus's crucifixion was a spectacle expressing existential values that for most of the spectators amounted to ethical singularities. Similarly, the threat of Darwinism to a fundamentalist form of Christianity is experienced by fundamentalists as terroristic. Christians do not see Darwinists as asking them merely to adopt certain beliefs and abandon others; rather, Christians experience Darwinian evolutionary biology—much of science, really—as threatening a kind of moral annihilation.

20. See Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005).