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Terrorization as Morally Problematic

Introduction

Bat-Ami Bar On argues that terrorism is morally problematic. This thesis first requires her to define terrorism. She outlines the debate regarding whether terrorists and freedom fighters are similar. She uses Conor Cruise O'Brien's definition to show that the two have the same end, that is, violence, and are thus neither morally nor conceptually distinct (P.109). Bar On's argument requires a definition of cruelty, which is then followed by a discussion about the moral status of cruelty. Bar On states that the morally problematic nature of terrorism lies in its production of people who are psychologically and morally diminished. Thus, terrorism is cruel.

Argument

The opening question Bar On asks relates to the process through which the terrorized are formed (P.110): How are people taught to fear through terrorism? Fear is accomplished by way of a developmental or formative process (P.111) on the part of the terrorists. This is the method by which the victim of terrorism is formed. Through the formative process, fear is "triggered by things and movements that are not extraordinary within an ordinary day-to-day context" (P.111). For example, a friend who was visiting Canada from Palestine and I were walking down an average street in Victoria.¹ An old car passed us and as it did, the engine backfired. Upon hearing the loud noise, my Palestinian friend hit the ground while I remained in full conversation as though nothing significant had happened. This illustrates how he has a great sense of fear of his life ending through 'random' acts. The unexpected noise was similar to that of gun-fire, yet here in Canada, it is associated with a common and harmless action (of a car backfiring). My friend's formal development of self, as an agent who has civil rights, has been affected by acts of terrorism. This illustrates Bar On's claim that terrorism "interrupts the causal relation between what people do and what happens to them" (P.111). The terrorized's "sense of a continuous experience and memory weakens and even breaks down ... leading to a shrinking or breakdown of personality" (P.111). This formative process produces people who are psychologically and morally diminished, and because of this it is, according to Bar On, cruel (P.107).

Bar On's argument hinges on two main premises. The first is that the victim of terrorism is a diminished self. The second premise states that terrorism creates individuals who are motivated to cause bodily harm to others. The second requires a discussion of the definition of cruelty.

Bar On's first premise that terrorists "create the anguish that the terrorized experience as they feel their selves erode and fear they will break" (P.117) is established by way of a parallel between the effects of terrorism and the effects of acts such as "seasoning" a prostitute to torture (P.111-113). In the act of "seasoning," a prostitute is alienated from herself through the actions of the pimp that instill in her a feeling of total helplessness (P.112). In other words, her spirit is broken. What results is a loss of self-esteem, self-respect and any sense of capacity or agency" (P.112) -- a diminished self. In acts of torture, the victim is prevented from "being the agent of anything" and simultaneously is told that she is the "agent of some things" (P.113). Through the experience of pain, the tortured is "formed into a self-betrayer" (P.113), which leads to a diminished sense of self. What is tested in

both cases is the "strength of their will" (P.113). At the same time that the victims become "aware of their weakness, they also become aware of the erosion of their will" (P.113), which emphasizes the "urgency of the victim's taking her action in her own behalf while making it utterly impossible for her to do so" (P.112).

The acts of "seasoning" a prostitute and torture are not analogous to Bar On's argument that terrorism is cruel, because the situations of torture and seasoning both involve the "confinement and isolation of its victims" (P.114). In terrorism however, the situation is often much more complicated (P. 114). The civil and liberal freedoms of a democratic state are threatened by terrorism (P.115). In a terrorist case, practices instituted to control terrorism, such as "careful inspection of people and luggage in airports," threaten and risk violation of civil liberties. Civil liberties embody the freedom of people to govern themselves together, as a society,² in contrast to liberal freedoms or the condition under which an individual person has the right not to be interfered with by others.³ In a terrorist environment, liberal freedoms such as security are often heightened through state legislation and regulatory acts. This occurs, however, at the expense of the freedom of collective governance by the people of the democracy, as (for example) freedom of speech is diminished. I think that Bar On would agree that people and governments have the obligation to free themselves and the people of a nation from a terrorist situation. It may be said that the United States of America was a victim of terrorism because of their extreme civil libertarian state.⁴ The United States has been seen as and has projected themselves as 'the home of the free and the land of the brave.' Under humanists such as Milton, the United States has moved from a Machiavellian state where Christianity and the republican tradition are closely tied together (liberal freedom is central) to one where the church and state are separate thereby allowing for the people to choose how their society ought to be (civil freedom is central).⁵ This does not mean, however, as some fundamentalists might claim, that a forgetfulness or lack of religion occurs. Worship just takes a different form in a move from the public realm to the private sphere.⁶

This move is offensive to some political/religious ideologies, especially those who are fundamentalist in nature. In these nations, the state and religion are closely tied (see Iranian fundamentalists, the Taliban in Afghanistan, etc.). Often there is a great feeling of responsibility by the fundamentalists to end or stop behaviour (even in foreign nations) that is seen as against the wishes of Allah (God) or their gods. In most fundamentalist states, liberal and civil freedoms have not been differentiated -- civil freedom just does not exist.

The second premise of Bar On's argument is her claim that terrorism produces individuals who are motivated to increase the bodily suffering of the victims of terrorism (P.116). Following Regan's distinction between two kinds of cruelty as taking 'a seeming kind of pleasure' in causing another to suffer or the lack of what is judged as appropriate feeling for the victim (apathy) (P.116-117), Bar On claims that "terrorists intentionally intensify the suffering of people whom they intentionally victimize" (P.117). From this, Bar On arrives at the statement that "terrorists are cruel" (P.117). Bar On further argues that terrorism is not only cruel but that it "produces people who are psychologically and morally diminished" (P.107). This is what makes terrorism morally problematic. Bar On uses concepts such as hospitality and kindness, cruelty and compassion, to show what is wrong with terrorism (P.119).

According to the 'just war' tradition, there needs to be a differentiation between the "general question of whether some resort to force is morally justified and the particular question of whether this or that specific form of force is morally justified" (P.119). Bar On rejects this line of argument for four reasons. The first is that she believes that "most of the arguments either for or against terrorism do not use all of the criteria or guidelines for assessment" in the 'just war' tradition (P.119). According to the criteria to act as guidelines for assessment, there must be a "just cause for the use

of force"; there must be a "legitimate authority seeking to use it, popular support for it, and ways of controlling it"; the force must be used as a "last resort" and "whether the overall damage that will result ... is at least balanced by the good that will be attained by it" (P.119). These criteria are rarely met nor are they readily considered when terrorist attacks are planned.

The second is that Bar On does not see that the guidelines of the 'just war' argument "clearly distinguish between the assessment of use of force in general and the assessment of a specific use of force" (P.120). When theorists such as Hare and Young discuss terrorism, they talk of force in general terms (P.120). Both of these objections address Bar On's worry that the assessment of whether terrorism has a legitimate authority behind it misses what is morally problematic about terrorism, which is that it causes psychic injury to both the victims of terrorism and the terrorist (P.120). Her concern is with the psychological effects that terrorism has on both the terrorised and the terrorists (P.107). The cruelty of terrorism lies in the fear that is produced in the victim, which leads to a diminished self. The cruelty of terrorism affects the terrorist also, though not through fear but through indifference or pleasure at inflicting such fear in others (P.120), which Bar On has earlier stated is cruel.

The third objection that Bar On supplies for the rejection of the 'just war' tradition as satisfactory relies on the genesis or origins of the tradition. She notes that it was designed by Augustine to "legitimate certain wars" (P.120). This creates a framework for the legitimization of the use of force (P.120). Bar On does not want to legitimize terrorism.

Her final objection addresses her concerns that the 'just war' tradition accounts only for physical damage and says nothing about the psychic injury of the victims of terrorism. This worry is "not restricted to the terrorized but can be extended to the terrorist" (P.120). Bar On's worry about the moral status of terrorism centres on the emphasis on the psychic injury of terrorism.

Bar On uses concepts such as cruelty and compassion, hospitality and kindness to show why cruelty is morally problematic. She outlines four theorists' descriptions of what is morally wrong with cruelty. The first is that of Steven G. Smith who suggests that cruelty horrifies and the "repugnance felt is a 'protesting recoil from a violation' of normative, value-laden 'shoulds' and 'should nots'" (P.118). Bar On likens this to the Kantian categorical imperative's "prohibiting of the use of people as means" (P.118). This illustrates that, for Bar On's essay, the "only salient fact about terrorism is that it is a practice of terrorization in which terror is a means to an end other than itself" (P.108). How then, Bar On asks, can people who are terrorized and those terrorizing see the significance of the Kantian categorical imperative when morality is no longer relevant, as in the case of violence?

The second moral argument against cruelty centres around the description of compassion as the "imaginative dwelling on the condition of another person, an active emotional response of a certain degree of intensity" (P.118). Cruelty would be the lack of this condition. For example, Tom Reagan contrasts cruelty with kindness through a definition of a kind person as one who "is inclined to act with the intention of forwarding the interest of others, not for reasons of self-gain, but out of love, affection or compassion for the individuals whose interests are forwarded" (P.118). He says that a kind person is one who acts with the intention of forwarding the interests of other individuals out of love, affection or compassion for the individuals (P.118).

The final definition of cruelty Bar On offers comes from Philip Hallie. He contrasts "cruelty with hospitality" (P.118). Hallie argues that the root of genuine hospitality lies in a manifestation of an individual's or a group's belief in a love for humanity (P.118). Following this, Bar On claims that "the 'shoulds' of compassion, kindness and hospitality" -- the aims of humanity -- also seem to be violated (P.118) in a terrorist act. The 'shoulds' that she is referring to are the actions that make up the social interactions of humanity. There are certain qualities, such as compassion, kindness and

hospitality, that are necessary for a healthy society. A healthy society enables a fully expanded self to be possible. Bar On thus claims that without the 'shoulds' of compassion, kindness and hospitality, there arises a diminished self, such as that found in victims of terrorism.

So the cruelty of terrorists is morally problematic because of the formation of persons who are afraid. In particular, it is problematic because it does not allow people to develop to their full potential. As mentioned above, the full potential of a person is rooted in their societal context. If the context is one in which terrorism is very much a reality, then their self will be diminished through fear. This diminished self may not see that compassion, kindness and hospitality are central to an expanded self. This, Bar On says, is what is denied to persons in a terrorist state.

The argument that Bar On has outlined is deductive. She shows first that terrorism is cruel. Secondly, Bar On illustrates that cruelty is morally problematic. Therefore, terrorism is morally problematic.

However, Bar On does discuss the possibility that the fear instilled into people through terrorism can be unlearned or rudimentarily reversed. This occurs only if terrorism is no longer a threat. People must not fear that their lives are threatened by random acts for often misunderstood or seemingly purposeless aims. To protect people from these 'random' acts, the intervention by the government in the lives of the people of a nation is increased. But at what cost? Liberal freedom, which is the condition by which the individual is granted immunity from interference by others (i.e. terrorists), is increased through legislation and increased enforcement. However, this occurs at the expense of civil freedom because of the "practices they have to institute to prevent terrorism within their borders" (P. 115). Is this a fair trade for the reduction of fear that will be felt by the people? This is a very difficult question to ask, especially in light of the recent world events involving the U.S.A. and Afghanistan, or more accurately, the acts against the "American Spirit" and the 'war' against Osama bin Laden or terrorism.

Current world events, that is, the September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States of America, have resulted in decreased civil freedom in favour of increased liberal freedom within the borders of the US. This is seen through such actions as increased security and new anti-terrorism legislation.⁷

Conclusion

Is terrorism cruel because of its psychological effects on both the terrorized and the terrorist? Following Bar On's definition of cruelty and the morally problematic nature of terrorism, it does seem to be. The terrorist acts against the US have lead to a significant loss of self-confidence in the ability to protect the nation. This has lead to a diminution of the collective Self experienced by the people in the United States as well as in other 'free' and democratic nations. This diminished sense of self is cruel...or is it? I'm not sure whether the answer can be easily found in Bar On's argument for terrorism as morally problematic. The answer lies within the intricate web of the relationships between and among the governments (both legitimate and illegitimate) of the nations of the world, which sometimes also represent their people by way of liberal freedom (i.e. the US and Canada are a few).

What would an argument that expresses this sentiment look like? Bar On, in the first few pages of her article, uses the Jewish-Israeli - Palestinian conflict to outline what actions are required to decrease the psychological aspects of terrorism. That is, we must discontinue the conflict out of which terrorism arises. In the case of the Jewish-Israeli - Palestinian conflict, "an independent Palestinian state is the only realistic compromise solution" (P.107) because it directly addresses

where the current dispute began. Here Bar On is getting close to illustrating a reasonable solution to the morally problematic nature of terrorism. However, she does not go far enough.

For her argument to do justice to the complexity of the situations that give rise to terrorism, she must take into account the history of decisions that lead, for example, to the current Palestinian and Israeli war. There were many factors, some of which include Britain's interference in Israel (1930's & 40's); the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine's partition plan (1947) which set arbitrary boundaries in the area; the United States' intervention in Israel; etc. To look at the historicity of the situation, as well as Bar On's worry, would really allow us to get somewhere with the 'war on terrorism.' As it stands right now, there are too many patching techniques and not enough prevention mechanisms.

Notes

1 Based on a true story.

2 Taylor, Charles. "Religion in a Free Society" in *Articles of Faith, Articles of Peace*, ed. Hunter, James Davidson, and Guinness, Os. The Brookings Institution. USA.

3 Ibid.

4 This, however is not the true full answer. There is a complexity of issues surrounding this situation, therefore I will only focus on a few key aspects.

5 See Charles Taylor - article listed above.

6 See Charles Taylor - article listed above.

7 See Bill C-36 in Canada, which is designed to 'protect' the people of Canada from foreign threat while at the same time severely reducing civil freedom (i.e. to think and act in such a way that the people feel is correct and not solely in the way that the government feels is best).