Analysing concepts

Exercise

Terrorism

From *The Dark Heart of Italy*, Tobias Jones (London: Faber & Faber, 2004), p. 105.

‘For decades bemused historians and sociologists have analysed Italy’s terrorist phenomenon ... Ever since the Risorgimento, the argument went, the country had had a culture of violence that was “living and important”. According to that theory, the historical roots ... were clear: in 1894 the French President had been killed by Italian Anarchists, as were, later, the Spanish Prime Minister and the Empress of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1900 Umberto I was assassinated; in 1921, in a theatre in Milan, another bomb claimed the lives of more than twenty people. In 1928 eighteen were killed during an attempt to assassinate another Italian monarch ... “No other industrialised society,” wrote one academic in the Rivista Storica Italiana in 1980, “has seen a terrorist phenomena which, for duration ... diffusion and rootedness can compare to that of Italy.” “Violence has mesmerized us,” wrote another academic...’

Using the concept of terrorism loosely allows us to apply it to all kinds of violence, and even all kinds of protest. Even George Washington and Nelson Mandela have been described as terrorists, along with road protesters engaged in passive civil disobedience and those involved in a peaceful sit-in to prevent the destruction of ancient woodlands. At the same time, this looseness of definition allows those, for whose purposes it serves, to argue, misleadingly, that one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.

Take examples of terrorism and analyse the concept using the Three-step technique.

Answer:

I tentatively suggest the following definition. You may have come to a quite different answer. Nevertheless, now we these three definitions in front of us – the one above, mine and yours – discuss the shortcomings of each one and what we all might have missed.

‘The random nature of such killing strikes at the heart of one of our most deeply held moral commitments, that we are never justified in attacking the innocent and defenceless, whether they are the elderly war veteran mugged for his pension, the young child brutalised by uncaring parents, the trusting animal confined and tormented within its small prison, or unsuspecting shoppers maimed and killed on the streets of Belfast, Beirut or Tel Aviv...

The terrorist is unique amongst killers. These are not accidental killings, the unfortunate costs of war. He routinely sets out to kill ordinary people selected randomly in order to deliver a message of fear and to destroy civilian morale, both of which he expects will bring pressure upon governments. Unlike the political assassin or the gangland hit-man, the terrorist makes no distinction between those who are morally and politically responsible for oppression and those who are not.

He is insulated from the horror of his actions, because he never allows himself to acknowledge the personality and value of those he kills. He deliberately sets out to destroy the lives of indeterminate numbers of innocent people, who have done him no harm, whom he does not know and, in most cases, never sees. In this he suffers from the most disturbing moral and psychological flaw with which, mercifully, only a few of us are cursed. While we might not agree with their moral judgements, the political assassin and the hit-man are entitled to the sort of moral respect not due to the terrorist, because they do at least set limits to their actions.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. Bryan Greetham, ‘Terrorism and the Collapse of Moral Authority’, *Australian Rationalist*, No. 53, Winter 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)