

GEORG MEGGLE

WHAT IS TERRORISM?

1. Terrorism in general

1.1 What is *terrorism*? How does someone have to act to be justifiably called a *terrorist*?
By which features does an act become *terroristic*?

Of this trinity of T-Terms:

- Terrorism
- Terrorist
- Terroristic Act

the last one is the most important one. It can be used to define the other two, but not the other way round. Not everything that terrorists do is terroristic; just as not everything sexists or racists do is sexist or racist.

Terrorists, to put it roughly, are people who accomplish, prepare or plan terroristic acts, or who are deliberately involved in them in some other way. And *terrorism* refers either to the wide range of terroristic actions in general or to the terrorist's strategy or to the various ideologies motivating these actions or strategies.

So, a *Terroristic Act* is the basic concept in this field. Hence: *What is a T-act?* That's my central – and in fact: my only – question today.

1.2 Perhaps I should warn you: If you follow me, you will thereby undergo a kind of philosophical brainwashing. I hope you will. It may be even necessary – if not in your personal case, so at least with regards to the general public. Regarding the conceptions of T-Terms we have to undergo some conceptual brainwashing to be able to liberate ourselves from what DAVID KAPLAN has referred to as the *Terrorism of "Terrorism"*.^{*} I will come back to this point again at the end of this talk.

1.3 Let's take the normal route. First, let's look for some clear cases to start with – and delay the rest, the whole bunch of unclear cases, until later. Now, my own favourite paradigmatic case for a T-act is this one:

X, a separatist from a certain province, activates the timing mechanism of a bomb hidden in his briefcase in a room next door to the marketplace café in the capital of his country – intending to blow up dozens of people in the café in order to make the government release his imprisoned secessionist comrades.

This is the first level of the example. It is supervened by a second.

* This lecture is a mixture out of some parts of my "On Terrorism" stuff as already presented at various other occasions. So 1.1-1.10 is a (slightly modified) part of (1) and (2), whereas 2.7 – 2.13 relates to parts of (3) and (4).

See Tomis Kapitan, „Terrorism“ as a Method of Terrorism, in: G. Meggle (Ed.), *Ethics of Terrorism & Counter-Terrorism*, Heusenstamm/Frankfurt (Ontos), 2005, 21-38.

X expects or hopes that the government's decision to release his comrades will be prompted by the terror / the horror generated among the public by his T-act.

1.4 The first layer contains the so called *calculus of violence*: X assumes that his acts of violence will pay off by initiating his comrades' release. The second level contains the *calculus of terror*: X assumes he will achieve his aim by means of the terror caused by his act of violence, that is, by using terror he will make the government do something it would not do without being motivated by this terror. In other words: The Terror-Calculus says: X expects that the horror induced by his terroristic act will cause things to happen which would not have happened without this horror. This Terror Calculus is based on the expected horror function.

In T-acts, both calculi – the violence calculus and the terror calculus – are interlinked. (Just cf. 1.10 below.) In X's view, the violence calculus will work precisely *because* – and only because – the terror calculus will work.

1.5 The *T-act* concerned – in this case: activating the time bomb together with the related intentions and expectations – is so far merely an *attempt*. To make it *successful*, X's intentions contained in the first layer, and his expectation referred to in the second layer would also have to be fulfilled. That is, the following would have to hold:

Success in the first layer:

X's bomb did blow up dozens of café customers and thus caused his comrades to be released. (violence calculation successful)

& success in the second layer:

It really was the terror impact on the public which caused the government to decide to release his comrades. (terror calculation successful)

Thus, T-acts are *successful iff* both, the violence calculus and the terror calculus, actually work – the former with the help of the latter. Every T-act (every T-act-Attempt) aims at and relies on the success of this connection. It is precisely this linkage between the two calculi which differentiates T-acts from non-T-acts.

1.6 To sum up so far:

D1: T-acts are acts by means of which
effects are (attempted to be) brought about
 by means of **terror**
 produced by means of **violence**.

1.7 T-acts may vary enormously. Let's list the elements we have mentioned so far.

<i>Elements:</i>	<i>In our example:</i>
Act/Action a	Activation of the bomb
Actor X	Provincial separatist
Violence addressee Y	Café customers
Terror addressee Z	The general public
Final addressee F	The government
Final Intended effect R	Release of prisoners

Let's try and detach ourselves from the example. Stop looking at the right-hand column; just concentrate on the left and recall a few things.

The **T-act** itself: Apart from placing a bomb in a briefcase, this could be a million other things: anthrax powder in the mail; poisoning the water supply; deploying computer viruses; atomic, biological or chemical weapons; threatening someone with the use of torture; deliberately false alarms which create panic; etc. etc. The arsenal with which humans can create hell on earth for other people is inexhaustible.

Actor X needn't be acting alone. Actors may also be groups and collectives, organizations, institutions and their networks; even states or coalitions of states.

The same is valid for the various classes of the **addressees**.¹

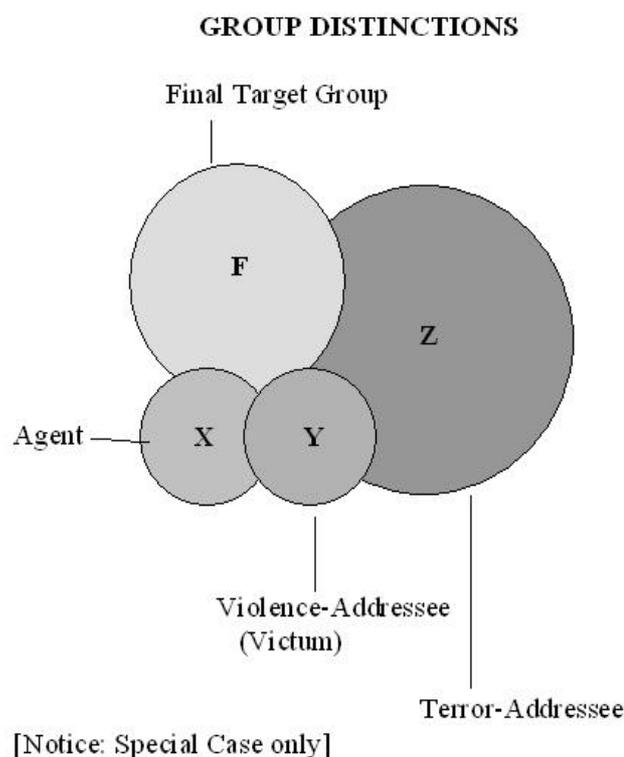
X may even be **an element of Y, the target group of the violence** – just think of suicide bombers.

Violence and terror addressees may be **identical** – and of course the final target addressee **F** (or parts thereof) may also be the addressee of the violence and terror.

X may even be a **member of the Final Addressee Group F** itself, in which case the T-act would be addressed to his own group. And ultimately:

The range of all the possible intended final **effects or reactions R** and of all the other aims of T-acts is just as unlimited as the arsenal of possible T-act means. Given all the things humans believe to be worth striving for, everything is possible. One could classify T-acts in terms of their different types of aims as political, religious, merely criminal, etc. Currently our interest is focused on politically and religiously motivated T-acts.

1.8 The following picture might help you to differentiate between the various groups involved in T-Acts – at least analytically. But notice: This representation is a special case. In practice some of these groups might not only overlap but even be identical.



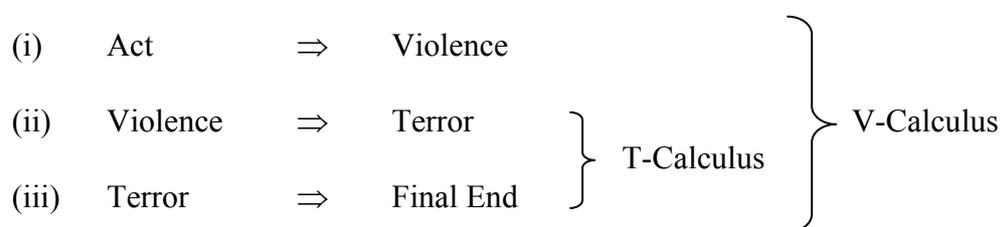
¹ Cf. Daniel Meßelken's contribution, this volume.

1.9 That much to the various elements in the definiens of T-Acts as defined in D1. Now back to its logical structure.

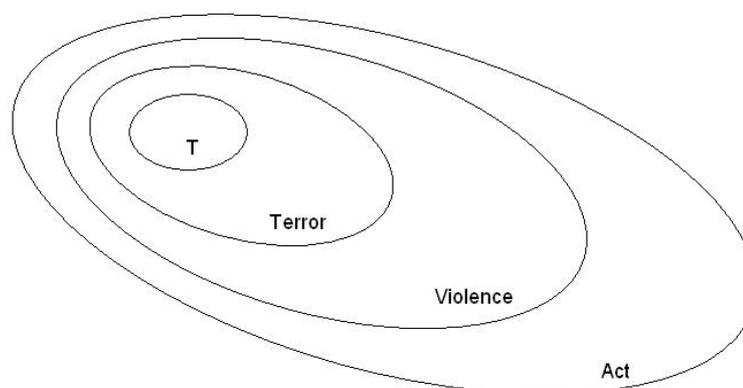
D1: T-acts are acts by means of which
effects are (attempted to be) brought about
 by means of **terror**
 produced by means of **violence**.

Don't be afraid that this definition might be circular. It is not. Though Terrorism implies Terror, Terror does not by itself imply Terrorism. (And if you don't like to use the action-related term "Terror" in the definiens at all, so just substitute for it some of its recipient counterparts as, e.g., "horror", "extreme fear", the Americans' favourite strategy of "shock and awe" etc.) Anyhow, in order to end up in Terrorism, Terror or Horror, respectively, needs to play its role in a *Terror-Calculus*. It's the calculation with terror which make's the difference.

1.10 Let's assume the case of a T-Act having been successful. Then we can sum up the logical structure of this act roughly this way, where $A \Rightarrow B$ is short for: A causes B.



The same structure could be visualized roughly this way:



1.11 This picture of a T-Act is totally different from the picture prevailing in the Mass Media presenting terrorists mainly as being driven by irrationality and therefore being beyond the reach of understanding for us (humans), the rational animals. Nothing could be further away from the truth.

T-Acts are just another form of instrumental acts, acts by means of which the actor intends to bring about certain ends. (It's true, that in case of T-Acts, this form is much more complicated than in normal cases.)

It is no problem for T-acts to be understood. As with instrumental acts in general, it holds: a concrete (T-) Act (e.g., the activation of the bomb in our café-house) is understood by you if you know the relevance the act in question has for the agent her/himself, i.e., if you know the intention with which the act is performed. Understanding an action is just to look at the action from its agent's point of view.

1.12 Two important things must be pointed out here.

First: According to this *general sense of understanding* it is enough to know the agent's intentions. You need not know anything about the (deeper) reasons why the agent has these intentions. Of course, any *deeper understanding* of an act would have to imply some knowledge about these (deeper) reasons behind the action as well. The same applies to T-Acts in particular. T-Acts can be as rational and understandable as any other act. ("Rational" – used here in the usual subjective sense as explicated in Rational Decision Theory.)

Second: Understanding an action, i.e. knowing the meaning it has for the agent, must strictly be separated from *approving* the action. You do not have to *share* the agent's action – intention, i.e. in order to understand the action.

1.13 D1, my first sketch of a T-Act-definition, is not very new: Just compare it with D. FROMKIN's proposal from as early as 1975:

Terrorism is violence used in order to create fear; but it is aimed at creating fear in order that the fear, in turn, will lead somebody else ... to embark on some quite different program of action that will accomplish whatever it is the terrorist really desires.²

1.14 Notice, that FROMKIN's article – with the title "The Strategy of Terrorism" – was not published in some remote philosophy journal. It appeared in the most famous American journal on international politics, in *Foreign Affairs*, No 53. Thus, an extremely good definition of Terrorism has been available since long. But the world preferred to ignore it. Why?

1.15 In one aspect FROMKIN's proposal was already more complex than my own starting D1. (But it surely was not more complex than our café-house story was). Just compare my

(iii) Terror ⇒ Final end

with FROMKIN's analysis postulating that "*this fear [this terror] shall in turn cause someone else to change his way of acting so that the final goal of the terrorist activities is achieved.*" (op. cit., Italics set by me.)

That's correct. In our café-house example the end of the imprisonment of the terrorist's comrades was expected by the terrorist to be brought about not *directly*, but only *indirectly* – via the intended reaction / decision of the government:

(iii.1) Terror ⇒ Decision_F
 (iii.2) Decision_F ⇒ Final end

1.16 This point is of the utmost importance – not just in theory, but also in real life. (iii.1) is (in this talk) the first point in the whole chain, at which it does the question, whether the respective T-act will be successful or not, will depend on the addressees themselves. Nobody could have stopped the café house visitors to be killed as soon as the bomb did explode as intended; but the government's decision was no MUST of the same (causal) sort. The government could have decided in another way, could have opted for NOT to give in.

Conclusion: There is at least one point of essential (conceptual) weakness of the T-Calculus: Its success will always depend on the other party's decisions. Maybe this point is of some practical importance as well.

1.17 Are there some further points of weakness to be found in the logic of T-Acts? Some further points where we could try to make the T-agent's terror-calculus break down? I am sure

² D. Fromkin, *The Strategy of Terrorism*, 1975, p. 693.

you have noticed already at least one additional point by yourself, haven't you? Just look at (ii) in more detail:

- | | | | |
|--------|----------------------|---|----------------------|
| (ii.1) | violence | ⇒ | violence recognition |
| (ii.2) | violence recognition | ⇒ | terror |

Important as it may be, let's skip these and many more details (relating to the practices of our media) to another occasion.

Up to now we have considered only T-acts in a wide sense. Now, let's turn to T-acts in a narrower sense.

2. Strong Terrorism

2.1 FROMKIN's Definition – as well as D1 of my own – covers Terrorism (sorry: covers T-Acts) only of a very general sense. Both of them have left out the crucial condition which is at the very centre of the debate on Terrorism, even in the very few serious conceptual discussions. IGOR PRIMORATZ, the clearest mind in the whole field, has taken this additional condition into account in his own T-definition as follows:

(IP) Terrorism is [best defined as] the deliberate use of **violence**, or threat of its use, **against innocent people**, with the aim of intimidating some other people into a course of action they otherwise would not take.³

2.2 The differentia specifica of T-Acts in this narrower sense is the *innocence of the victims of the T-Act's violence* (our group Y from schema NN), innocent children being the paradigm of what "innocence" means here.

Now, again, it is quite understandable why T-Acts of this (special) kind are so central: They (are to be expected to) belong to the most effective ones: Killing innocent children is the most effective means to shock humans. It's the best way how to maximize shock and awe.

2.3 This *innocence-condition* is one of the traditional conditions of *just war theory*. There it was – and still is – meant to exclude as *legitimate targets of violence* all those who are not "members of armed forces and security services", who do not "supply them with arms and ammunition", and who are not "political officials directly involved in the conflict".⁴

Exactly how and where (beyond innocent children) to draw the boundaries of this class of illegitimate targets of violence is a much debated and still unsettled question – in the Ethics of War and even more so in the Ethics of Terrorism, of course.

In this context we do neither want nor need to decide this normative question. Let's follow again my general methodological maxim of focusing on clear cases exclusively – at least at the beginning. Thus, when thinking of Illegitimate Violence Targets you best just think of "innocent kids or even babys" – and again, for the sake of the argument – forget about the rest.

2.4 Now, D2 defines what I propose to refer to from now onwards as *T-Acts in the narrow sense*:

D2: T-acts are acts by means of which
effects are (attempted to be) brought about
 by means of *terror*
 produced by means of *violence against Illegitimate
 Targets.*

³ I. Primoratz, in [1], p. 70.

⁴ Ibid.

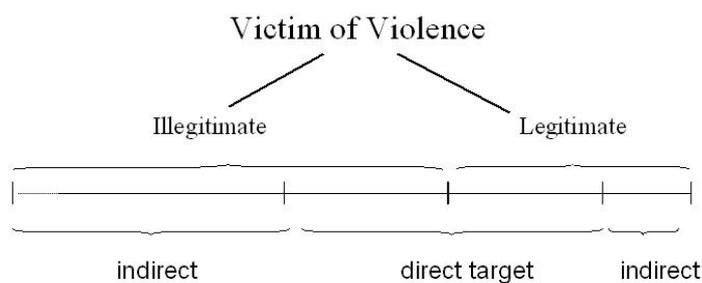
2.5 Though this talk is not intended to be on the moral evaluation of T-Acts, I am nevertheless primarily interested in those differentiations which, I suppose, will be most relevant for making such evaluations in a principled and universalizable way.

There is still much to do in this respect. My impression is that many of the flaws in the normative T-discourse are due to the tremendous lack of real interest in the Semantics of this discourse.

2.6 My next clarifications will relate to acts of violence in general, not only to T-Acts in particular. And in fact, these clarifications will be relevant not only for the Ethics of Terrorism, but also for the Ethics of Violence and War – in particular for the Ethics of the so called *Collateral Damages*.

2.7 Starting with the distinction between *Legitimate* versus *Illegitimate Victims of Violence* let's distinguish next between whether the victim is a *direct* or an *indirect victim* of the violence in question. You are a direct victim of my act of violence iff my violence is deliberately directed by me against you, whereas in the indirect case you are a victim of my violence but this violence was not deliberately directed against you.

Now, as these two distinctions might overlap, we get these possible 4 combinations.



2.8 My next point relates to *strict accountability*, as I will call it. Let's suppose my action A did cause some damage D. Then, so I will say, I am *strictly accountable* for damage D iff either (i) I knew that A will cause D or (ii) at least I could – and should – have known it to be so. (By the way, I know that this point would definitely need some additional details.)

2.9 It is very important to see that Strict Accountability is not restricted to cases where my victims are my *direct* victims. I may be strictly accountable also for the violence suffered by my *indirect* victims. To blur this very distinction is, I guess, one of the main functions, and maybe the main reason the term of *Collateral Damages* has been created for – for the first time massively used, I remember very well, in the context of the NATO bombing raids against Serbia and Montenegro in 1999.

Contrary to what the term “Collateral Damage” implies, there are cases of collateral damages for which one might be accountable for even in the strict sense.

2.10 For reasons of time, I will not spell out the resulting T-Act-Definitions; but just present them by means of this concluding SCHEMA.

2.13 Now, let's go back to where we had started from.

Of the trinity of T-Terms

- Terrorism
- Terrorist
- Terroristic Act

the last term is the fundamental one. Now, it has turned out that this concept has a very clear logical structure – a structure linking the violence calculus and the terror-calculus. On the basis of this logical structure there are several increasingly stronger sub-Concepts to be distinguished. Hence a principled Classification of various types of T-Acts is possible.

On the basis of all these findings we should approach next the ideal form of a T-Semantics, i.e. a T-Logics, a formal Language T^* in which the main Terrorism-concepts can be expressed, accompanied by an interpretation concept with which an inference concept for sentences containing T^* -expressions can be formulated. That much to the basic Semantics of T-Acts.

Summary: Due to the cognitive content of T-Terms there is a basis for rational T-Discourse. Or there would be – if, in our Terrorism-discourse, rationality in this basic conceptual sense would be wanted. But it is not; in the contrary: Politicians and the Media do their best just to avoid this kind of rationality.

3. Pragmatics

3.1 From the Semantics sketched so far the Pragmatics (or the Rhetoric) of Terrorism Discourse is worlds apart. There (i) all of our semantical distinctions are systematically ignored. (ii) Definitions are not generally agreed upon – with even (iii) the possibility and utility of such definitions being denied; instead, (iv) real or imagined T-cases are used to deliver the most efficient means for the justification for nearly everything – for almost everything which, without these Terrorism-Threats, could not have been justified at all or at least not so easily. (v) To name you a terrorist is not just to make you an outlaw, it is to excommunicate you from the human race.

3.2 In Politics's and in the Media T-Terms belong to the most efficient weapons of mass-deception. Condemnation is already part and parcel of their very meaning. But condemnation is normally about the wrong-doing not of Us, but of the Others. Consequently, the political and the media's Terrorism-Talk implies two essential restrictions: First, there is a restricting relativity with regards to Terrorist *agency*; and there is a second restricting relativity with regards to the agent's intended *final ends*.

3.3 *States* themselves or their institutions are only regarded as possible *targets* of Terrorism, never as being also possible agents of terrorist actions; and even if they are, then these states must be not be of the same (democratic, liberal, secular etc.) sort as one's own state – or at least not be identical with one's own state. Thus, for example, from the point of view of the western Media, Iran may be a state engaged in Terrorism, but not the US or some other democratic states, say Israel, e.g. (This first restriction guarantees, that the largest terrorist training camp will be located in Afghanistan or Syria, let's say, but never in Florida.)

3.4 The best example for the second exclusion is to be found in JASSIR ARAFAT's statement addressed to the General Assembly of the UN in 1974:

*He who fights for a just cause,
he who fights for the liberation of his country,
he who fights against invasion and exploitation,
or single-mindedly against colonialism,
can never be a terrorist.*

Acceptance of this relativity of the just cause perspective is manifested also in the US view of Bin Laden's career:

<i>Bin Laden</i>	<i>Sowjet Union</i>	<i>USA</i>
Before 1989	Terrorist	Freedom Fighter
After 1989	Terrorist	Top-Terrorist

3.5 It is this double relativity which makes any consensual understanding of Terrorism quite impossible, indeed. But obviously that is just what seems to be wanted in this field. Otherwise, the huge Terrorism Industry – to be more precise: the billions-of-dollar-network of the Experts and Institutions that shape our view of Terrorism – might be in danger to lose its very function: To keep the T-perception management running.

3.6 Now, we are faced with this alternative: either we continue to be brainwashed by the Media or we start to liberate ourselves from the conceptual Restrictions of the Media-mediated "Terrorism"-Discourse, from, to quote TOMIS KAPITAN again, from the "Terrorism of "Terrorism"". ⁵ I, as a philosopher, prefer to choose the second option. But this means: We have to do some own philosophical brainwashing in order to free us from the results of the general public brainwashing. That is it what this morning talk was all about. Did you follow me?

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⁵ See note 1 above.

Georg Meggle

WHAT IS TERRORISM?

(Summary)

Terroristic acts (T-Acts) are acts by means of which *effects* are (attempted to be) brought about by means of *terror* produced by means of *violence*. This definition of T-Acts will be argued for and then sub-specified within the dimension of the agent's *accountability* for the T-Act in question.