The Terror of 'Terrorism': An Empirical Investigation

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Abstract

Some think that appropriate responses to terrorism are in part shaped by popular sentiment. But is popular sentiment about terrorism susceptible to manipulation? We bring the methodology of experimental philosophy to bear on this question. In a series of two experiments, we present evidence that using the word 'terrorism' to describe a group of people influences judgments about that group. We also present evidence that judgments about the permissibility of force against terrorist groups can be influenced by what has recently been considered. We argue that these results have important implications for how we should go about and improve making decisions about terrorism. Theoretical implications for the practice of applied ethics are discussed.
September 11\textsuperscript{th}, 2001, terrorists hijacked airplanes and flew them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Nearly 3,000 people died. Heroic passengers on United Flight 93 sacrificed themselves to save other innocent lives. Over 40 people died. The ensuing years have seen the United States of America's response to the attacks: the “War on Terror.” This response has resulted in several important wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. As a result of this strategy, more innocent lives have been lost and the political landscapes of large parts of the world have been changed. Without a doubt, terrorism and responses to terrorism have had a major influence on the world, the way we view the world, and the attitudes we have toward other people.

Given the cost of the War on Terror in terms of lives and well-being, finding an appropriate response to terrorism is a high stakes and important endeavor. What helps determine an appropriate response to terrorism? One thought is that popular sentiment and attitudes are guides to an appropriate responses to terrorism. As Noam Chomsky has noted, “it is possible for popular action to have a significant impact on policy” (1988, p. 7). That popular sentiment partially determines appropriate responses to terrorism is not surprising. Terrorism is a prominent issue in politics, and politicians have an interest in being elected. Hence, politicians have an interested in respecting popular opinion when they make policies and decisions about terrorism. But how do people think about terrorism and what courses of action do people endorse with respect to terrorists? Can judgments about terrorism be trusted, manipulated, or improved?

We take these to be questions that require experimental investigation. Bringing the tools of experimental philosophy to help illuminate these issues, we have three main goals. The first is to suggest that merely calling a group of people 'terrorists' sanctions a variety of actions against that group that are not permissible against other groups of people (Kapitan, 2004). Second, we
present evidence suggesting that people's intuitions about terrorism can be predictably influenced by what has recently been considered. Finally, we argue that these results have important practical and theoretical implications for the ethical understanding of terrorism and point to the possibility of making better decisions about responses to terrorism.

**The Terror of 'Terrorism'**

A standard definition of terrorism is “deliberately subjecting civilians to violence, or to the threat of violence, in order to achieve political objectives” (Kaptian, 2004, p. 22). However, there is some controversy over how best to characterize terrorism. Many find the traditional definition deficient. As a result, some theorists attempt to augment the definition of terrorism. For example, some add that terrorism consists in “spectacular acts of violence that transgress shared rules of war” (Smith, 2007, p. 202) that may result in “severe damage to the property of non-combatants” (Coady, 1985, p. 52) and could be “negligent or reckless” (Rodin, 2004, p. 755). Many theorists (e.g., Smith, 2007; Cody, 1985; Rodin, 2004; Scheffler, 2006) hint at what Khatchadourian calls terrorism's “bifocal character.” The bifocal nature of terrorism is characterized by targeting some people (immediate victims) to “victimize” a larger population (the intended victims) (Khatchadourian, 1998, p. 6). For example, the purpose of the 9/11 attacks were to victimize the United States population. To do so, some immediate victims had to be killed who were not the real targets of the acts.

The controversy over how to characterize 'terrorism' may partly be because it is an ambiguous term. The notion of terrorism has been applied to a number of different entities, activities, and ends. The problem of defining terrorism is compounded because it is largely used as a means to condemn one's enemies. As a result of the rhetorical uses of terrorism, terrorism
may be “too ideologically freighted to have any analytic value” (Scheffler, 2006, p. 1) resulting in a general inability “to provide a full analysis of its use in common language” (Rodin, 2004, p. 752-3). Because terrorism does not lend itself to a neat definition, many theorists think that the notion of terrorism is a “family resemblance” concept with some clear core cases but with unclear boundaries (Khatchadourian, 1998, p. 10; Rodin, 2004).

Regardless of the correct definition of terrorism, a perusal of the philosophical literature indicates that 'terrorism' has a negative connotation. Many think that terrorism is “morally objectionable” (Smith, 2008, p. 201), “a prima facie evil” (Scheffler, 2006, p. 1), “always morally wrong” (Khatchadourian, 1998, p. 79), and “immoral wherever and whenever it is used “ (Coady, 1985, p.58). Indeed, “most of us regard acts of terrorism with abhorrence” (Rodin, 2004, p. 753) and “terrorism is very widely condemned as a major... unmitigated evil” (Khatchadourian, 1998, p. 1). Some have commented that “those who are prepared to seek retribution by attacking civilians and civilian objects are already past the point of being amenable to reason and moral argument” (Reiff, 2008, p. 242). As these comments indicated, being called a 'terrorist' appears to carry with it a host of negative attitudes.

Partly because terrorism is ambiguous and has a negative connotation, “terrorism'...has arisen and continues to be employed in contexts of highly emotional, partisan, even hysterical nature” (Coady, 1985, p. 51) and “is in danger of becoming little more than a pejorative term used to refer to the tactics of one's enemies” (Scheffler, 2006, p. 1). As a result, Kapitan (2004) argues that calling a group of people 'terrorists' is an effective tool to discredit them.

[T]hese labels are used selectively by governments, their associated media, and their agencies of propaganda, to describe those who forcefully opposed government policies.
Because of its negative connotation, the 'terrorist' label automatically discredits any
individuals or groups to which it is affixed, dehumanizes them, places them outside the
norms of acceptable social and political behavior, and portray them as “evil” people that
cannot be reasoned with. (Kapitan, 2004, p. 27)

As a direct consequences of the 'terrorist label', Kapitan thinks people are: (a) less inclined to
understand the group's grievances (b) less likely to negotiate with the group (c) more likely to
condone violence against the group (d) more likely to think the group consists of unreasonable
fanatics. The result of (a)-(d) is often a seemingly endless cycle of violent retaliation with many
people dying in the cross-fire.

We take no stand in this paper about the proper response to terrorism, the correct
definition of terrorism, or if terrorism is morally permissible. Rather, we have a much more
modest goal. By our lights, (a)-(d) are empirically testable claims: does applying the word
'terrorist' to a group of people marginalize it in ways indicated by (a)-(d)? To help determine the
answer to this question, we propose to make use of the methods of experimental philosophy.

Experimental Philosophy

Experimental philosophy is a radical new approach to philosophical problems. It uses the
experimental methodologies of psychology, sociology, behavioral economics, and cognitive
science to help answer philosophical questions (for a review of experimental philosophy, see
Feltz, 2009). Experimental philosophy has helped shed light on important philosophical issues
including, but not limited to, philosophy of mind (Feltz & Cokely, 2009; Feltz, Cokely, &
Nadelhoffer, 2009; Huebner, Bruno, & Sarkissian, in press; Nichols & Knobe, 2007; Sytsma &
Machery, 2009), ethics (Nadelhoffer & Feltz, 2008; Nichols, 2002; Nichols & Folds-Bennett,
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2003), and epistemology (Buckwalter & Beebe, in press; Feltz & Zarpentine, in press; May, Sinnott-Armstrong, Hull, & Zimmerman, in press; Swain, Alexander, & Weinberg, 2008; Weinberg, Nichols, & Stich, 2001).

Experimental philosophy typically proceeds by asking non-professional philosophers in a controlled and systematic way what they think about philosophically relevant questions. Typically, but not always, experimental philosophers give people a description of some philosophically relevant scenario and then ask them questions about the scenario. These results are then argued to be of philosophical importance. For example, one of the best known examples in experimental philosophy is Knobe's chairman cases:

**Harm**

The vice-president of a company went to the chairman of the board and said, 'We are thinking of starting a new program. It will help us increase profits, but it will also harm the environment.' The chairman of the board answered, 'I don't care at all about harming the environment. I just want to make as much profit as I can. Let's start the new program.' They started the new program. Sure enough, the environment was harmed.

**Help**

The vice-president of a company went to the chairman of the board and said, 'We are thinking of starting a new program. It will help us increase profits, and it will also help the environment.' The chairman of the board answered, 'I don't care at all about helping the environment. I just want to make as much profit as I can. Let's start the new program.' They started the new program. Sure enough, the environment was helped. (Knobe, 2003a, p. 191)
The only difference between the two cases is the moral valence of the side effect of implementing the new program. But even given this small difference, people on average judge that the bad side effect in Harm is brought about intentionally and that the good side effect in Help is not brought about intentionally. This asymmetry has been replicated across a variety of cases involving side effects (Cushman & Mele, 2008; Knobe, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004b, 2006; Knobe & Mendlow, 2004; McCann, 2005; Mele & Cushman, 2007; Nadelhoffer, 2004, 2005, 2006; Nichols & Ulatowski, 2007), cultures (Knobe & Burra, 2006), and ages (Leslie, Knobe, & Cohen, 2006).

Knobe's results were surprising. It has changed some philosophers' (Mele & Sverdlik, 1996) mind that the moral valence of a side effect can influence intentionality judgments about some side effects (Mele, 2003). Moreover, the Simple Views of intentional action explicitly rejects that an action that is not intended can be intentional. Rather, the Simple View holds that in order to intentionally action $A$, one must intend to $A$ (Adams, 1986; McCann, 1986). The side effect in Harm is not intended as the chairman did not care at all harming the environment. However, many people thought that the harm was brought about intentionally. Hence, some behaviors that are not intended are judged intentional, seemingly falsifying the Simple View as part of the folk concept of intentional action (Nadelhoffer, 2006).

As Knobe's cases illustrate, many findings in experimental philosophy are surprising. Many of these findings would not likely be discovered from the armchair. More importantly, the right kind of evidence for some claims that philosophers make (e.g., that intuitions about intentional action should not be sensitive to moral considerations) can only be found by stepping out of the armchair and gathering empirical data (Alexander and Weinberg, 2007).
The connection of experimental philosophy and applied ethics is perhaps even more direct. Given that one of the purposes of applied ethics is to help answer actual (as opposed to purely theoretical) questions, understanding how everyday people understand some applied ethical issues is critical. For example, (a)-(d) claim to represent the tendency of judgments of actual people. Experimental philosophy is ideally suited to help shed light on exactly these sorts of issues. Consequently, we propose to use the basic methodology of experimental philosophy to explore (a)-(d).

**Experiment 1**

Experiment 1 was designed to test (a)-(d). Some related empirical work exists suggesting that (a)-(d) are correct. For example, Pronin, Kennedy, and Butsch (2006) present evidence that responses to terrorism are influenced by the perceived rationality of the terrorist group. Those terrorist groups that are deemed to be irrational are more likely to be judged to warrant a military response than those that are perceived to be rational. Allhoff (in press) also has presented evidence that people judge it more permissible to torture a terrorist for vital information (even if the probability of success is small) compared to torturing a non-terrorist. While the existing evidence is suggestive that (a)-(d) are correct, it is insufficient to substantiate (a)-(d). In Pronin et al's experiments, terrorist groups were described as rational or irrational. Hence, the rationality of the group was explicitly stated as opposed to implied by the term 'terrorism'. In addition, there was an asymmetry in Allhoff's cases where judgments were made about a guilty terrorist and a non-guilty non-terrorist. (a)-(d) do not emphasize the guilt or innocence of the group. Rather, Kapitan's main contention is that just being labeled 'terrorist' influences individuals' judgments resulting in (a)-(d). Hence, a separate set of studies was necessitated to substantiate (a)-(d).
Participants

Participants completed an online survey at PhilosphicalPersonality.com. Those who reported they were not native English speakers, under the age of 18, or took the survey more than once were excluded. After excluding these individuals, there were 316 participants remaining. The mean age was 38 (Range = 18-84). Two hundred and thirty-nine were female and 77 were male.

Materials

We provided participants with scenarios that only differed with respect to the names used to identify each group. One group was called a “terrorist” group and the other group was a “freedom fighting” group. The concepts of terrorism and freedom fighting are logically distinct. Freedom fighting can be different from terrorism in that freedom fighting (a) struggles for collective freedom, (b) does not typically target non-combatants, and (c) does not have the bifocal character of terrorism (Khatchadourian, 1998, p. 95). However, “it is perfectly possible for the same individual or group to practice ‘freedom fighting’ as well as to perform terrorist acts” (Khatchadourian, 1998, p. 95). Because some theorists hold that freedom fighting and terrorism are family resemblance concepts, there could be some overlap at the edges of being a terrorist and being a freedom fighter. Hence, it is reasonable to juxtapose 'terrorists' with 'freedom fighters' because while they are not necessarily the same things, they could engage in the same activities.

Because there were theoretical reasons that terrorists and freedom fighters could engage in some of the same activities, we used those terms to identify groups in exactly the same situation. We gave one group of participants (N = 145) the following Terrorists scenario and a
different group \((N = 171)\) the following Freedom Fighters scenario.

**Terrorists:** The Liberation Front consists of terrorists in Israel. They want an independent state because they claim to be oppressed by the Israeli state.

**Freedom Fighters:** The Liberation Front consists of freedom fighters in Israel. They want an independent state because they claim to be oppressed by the Israeli state.

These scenarios were intentionally under-described for two reasons: (i) so that the terrorist/freedom fighter terminology would not get overlooked and (ii) so that very little other information would influence judgments. Immediately following the scenarios, participants were asked to respond to the following prompts:

1. Israel should try to understand the grievances of the Liberation Front

2. Israel should negotiate with the Liberation Front.

3. It is permissible for Israel to use deadly force against members of the Liberation Front.

4. Most members of the Liberation Front are likely to be fanatics.

Two different orders of the questions were presented. For those who received the terrorist version, 66 received the prompts in order 1-4, and 79 received a reversed ordering of 4-1. For those who received the freedom fighters version, 76 received order 1-4 and 95 received order 4-1.

**Results and Discussion**

A mixed-model ANOVA with answers to the four prompts as within-participants factors and order and scenario versions as between-participants factors revealed the predicted difference, 

\[ F (3, 312) = 15.35, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05. \]  

Table 1 represents the means and standard deviations for each prompt.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Grievances</th>
<th>Negotiate</th>
<th>Force</th>
<th>Fanatics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freedom Fighters</td>
<td>( M = 5.02, SD = 1.7 )</td>
<td>( M = 4.98, SD = 1.72 )</td>
<td>( M = 2.95, SD = 1.91 )</td>
<td>( M = 4.25, SD = 1.47 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorists</td>
<td>( M = 4.38, SD = 2.02 )</td>
<td>( M = 4.37, SD = 1.91 )</td>
<td>( M = 3.94, SD = 2.02 )</td>
<td>( M = 4.69, SD = 1.59 )</td>
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To further explore these differences, four univariate ANOVAs were conducted with terrorism/freedom fighters language as independent variables and responses to each of the prompts as dependent variables. Each ANOVA revealed statistically significant differences:

Grievances, \( F(1, 314) = 9.5, p = .002, \eta^2_p = .03 \);
Negotiate \( F(1, 314) = 8.89, p = .003, \eta^2_p = .03 \);
Force \( F(1, 314) = 19.68, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .06 \);
Fanatics \( F(1, 314) = 6.47, p = .01, \eta^2_p = .02 \).

However, we also found a main effect of order, \( F(3, 312) = 7.33, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .02 \) that did not interact with scenario type \((F < 1)\). Overall, judgments tended to be more severe in order 4-1 than in 1-4. This suggested that answering the “fanatics” question first made people's judgments about that group more extreme (see Pronin, Kennedy, & Butsch, 2006 for a similar result). To explore this interesting phenomenon and how it could interact with judgments about terrorists, we conducted an additional experiment.

**Experiment 2**

Query theory is an emerging theory in economic decision making. Query theory postulates that the order in which choices are considered can predictably influence subsequent judgments. Because the order in which choices are considered can influence judgment, query theory holds that preferences that inform a decision can sometimes be constructed (Johnson, Häuble, & Keinen, 2007). These preferences can sometimes be constructed because: (1) decision makers decompose general questions into a series of questions, (2) people work through these questions serially, (3) the first questions worked through have “more weight” in the final
decision than latter questions, and (4) differences in query order can result in different judgments.

Query theory has mostly been applied to economic decision making. One example is the “endowment effect.” The endowment effect describes the phenomenon where people price an item they own much higher than they are willing to buy the exact same item. According to query theory, sellers start by focusing on positive aspects of the item whereas buyers focus on negative aspects. Given those different starting points, different evaluations of the very same item comes about (Johnson, Häuble, & Keinen, 2007). However, there is no theoretical reason that query theory does not operate in other domains as well. Along these lines, we hypothesized that what people considered before making judgments about terrorists could influence those judgments. We predicted that when participants first thought about terrorist activities harming individuals, they would be more likely to endorse the use of force against terrorists than participants who considered that information after making a judgment about the permissibility of using force.

Participants

Participants completed an online survey at PhilosphicalPersonality.com. Those who reported they were not native English speakers, were under the age of 18, or took the survey more than once were excluded. After excluding these individuals, there were 312 participants remaining. The mean age was 38 (Range = 18-82). Two hundred and eighteen were female, and 94 were male.

Materials

Pronin, Kennedy, and Butsch (2006) found that responses to terrorism are sensitive to contextual factors such news reports. Hence, to extend their general approach, a generic
description of terrorist activities from a real newspaper article was used. We selected the following newspaper article in part because it did not indicate that the terrorist group had actually done something wrong (although the potential was there):

Al-Shabab, which means "The Youth," has been gaining ground as Somalia's Western-backed government crumbles. The group's goal is to establish an Islamic state in Somalia...” Counterterrorism officials suspect that al-Shabab is recruiting young men from Somali communities in Minnesota and other Midwestern states, luring them back to their home country for terror training and creating cells of fighters who could travel to other countries, including the United States, to launch attacks. ” (Fox News, 2/28/2009, http://www.foxnews.com/wires/2009Feb26/0,4670,TerroralShabab,00.html)

Immediately following reading this news clip, participants were asked to respond to the following prompts:

1. Since 2001, have terrorists killed more than 12,000 adults (over 18) in the world?

2. Since 2001, do you think terrorists attacks have killed more than 900 children in the world?

3. Since 2001, are there more terrorist attacks in California than in New York?

4. On the scale provided, indicate how much you agree with the following statement: It is permissible for the United States to use deadly force against Al-Shabab.

The manipulation group (N = 161) received the prompts in order 1-4, and the control group (N = 151) received the prompts in the reversed order 4-1.

Results and Discussion
An ANOVA revealed the predicted difference between 1-4 order \((M = 4.04, SD = 2.21)\) and order 4-1 \((M = 3.24, SD = 1.86)\), \(F(1, 310) = 11.87, p = .001, \eta^2_p = .04\). These results indicated that what had recently been considered can alter judgments about responses to terrorism. Those who first considered the harms that terrorists have brought about were much more likely to think that force against terrorists is permissible. This result is importantly different from Pronin et al's result as our materials did not stipulate properties about the terrorists (i.e., that they are irrational). In accordance with query theory, it is plausible that these judgments are actually constructed and influenced by what had been considered (i.e., the harms terrorists have brought about). Hence, Experiment 2 represents a novel application of query theory.

**General Discussion**

In Experiment 1, we found evidence that suggested that simply calling a group of individuals “terrorists” can influence judgments about that group. These findings offer support for (a)-(d). In Experiment 2, we found that judgments about terrorists can be predictably manipulated by what had recently had been considered. After considering the harms that some terrorists bring about, people are much more likely to think that force is permissible against terrorist groups than when that information is considered later.

These results are important because they provide a new view of the source of disputes about terrorism and some ways to overcome those disputes. Some have claimed that one prominent component of terrorist attacks is retribution. For example, the “twin bombings” in Moscow in 2010 were performed by the wives of revolutionaries in Chechnya who had been killed in a Russian raid. The Chechen group to which they belonged justified these bombings as retribution for the deaths that occurred during those raids. This example illustrates a general
pattern. Terrorist often feel as if they are exacting justice against those that they feel have wronged them (Reiff, 2008). Assuming that a major factor in terrorist violence could be retributions (Scheffler, 2006), we can see how the cycle of violence Kapitan (2004) refers to can come about. If a group is labeled terrorist, that increases the permissibility of using violence against that group. But if violence is used against the terrorist group, they will likely seek retribution. And again, by calling them terrorists, we will be more likely to think it permissible to use violence once again against them (Kapitan, 2004). A never ending cycle of violence ensures. This cycle of violence is compounded by the fact that when the term “terrorists” is applied to a group, we are less likely to want to understand that group's grievances or negotiate with them.

Given these considerations, a problem seems evident—the never ending cycle of terrorist violence-retribution-terrorist violence. And, as we have seen time and time again, many innocents are killed in the repeated acts of violence. Assuming that violence and innocent deaths are prima facie evils, it seems as if we have a moral obligation to prevent those things if possible, everything else being equal. The evidence from our series of experiments present possible ways out of the seemingly never ending cycle of violence. First, people (including news agencies and politicians) should be extremely cautious when employing the term 'terrorism'. Simply by using that term, we are increasing the probability that force is deemed permissible against that group as they are fanatics who we have little reason to understand. Second, when thinking about the correct responses to terrorism, we should not encourage decision makers to think about acts of violence that terrorist groups have committed. Thinking first of terrorist violence will increase the likelihood that violence will be deemed permissible and thereby increase the likelihood that the cycle of violence will continue.
Apart from the specific prescriptions these findings offer, they are also of general importance to the applied ethical study of terrorism. They provide some necessary empirical evidence for the claims made by some philosophers. As Kapitan argues, calling a group of people terrorists carries along with it a host of consequences. However, no systematic study of those consequences had been conducted. Hence, the right kind of evidence for those claims was lacking. The current series of studies fills in that void. In addition, these studies represent a general advancement in the study of applied ethics highlighting the necessity of empirical investigation in applied ethics. While it is true that applied ethics is more connected with the empirical aspect of philosophy than its non-applied counterpart, applied ethicists sometimes make claims without the right kind of support. For example, Coady claims that “most observers...describe any revolutionary as a terrorist and virtually any revolutionary use of violence as terrorism” (1985, p. 63). This claim again is an empirical claim about what “most observers” would describe. Our evidence suggests that the claim is false. Most people do not describe any revolutionary act as terrorist, or if they do, some attitudes towards “revolutionaries” and “terrorists” can be very different. However, essentially, the only way to discover if Coady is correct is to gather the requisite empirical evidence.

Our data also provide a valuable new application of query theory. For the most part, query theory has only been applied to economic decision making (Frederick & Loewenstein, 2008; Johnson, Häuble, & Keinen, 2007). Our study suggests that query theory may have important implications on other fields that are not directly related to economic decision making (broadly construed). This not only opens up new avenues in the empirical exploration of applied ethics, but it also provides converging evidence that query theory is a valuable approach to help
answer some important questions.

In summary, terrorism is a vitally important issue for contemporary society. There is mounting evidence that judgments about terrorism and terrorist activities are determined by a multitude of factors. One of these factors is simply calling a group “terrorists.” Another factor is the context in which judgments about terrorists are made. Understanding these differences is important for a host of ethical issues surrounding terrorism including proper responses to terrorism, public policies about terrorism, and our own relations to terrorism. By carefully thinking about the halo of factors surrounding judgments about terrorism, we hope to have provided some ways to think more clearly about terrorism and our response to terrorism.
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