

## **OF TERRORISM AND RATIONALITY: IN SEARCH OF AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATION**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The phenomenon of terrorism is generally believed to be of irrational cowardice, identified with individuals bent on senseless destruction of lives and property, and thriving in ignorance or poverty of the mind. Yet, recent realities indicate that the executors of terrorism have no appreciable problem of psychopathology, and that many of them are as educated and economically well-to-do as many around them<sup>1</sup>. In this paper, attempt is made to explore the phenomenon of terrorism with a view to understanding its antecedent condition, and therefore, possible prevention. To this end, the paper employs the argument of naturalized epistemology to identify and examine the terrorist epistemological condition, and hence, a theory of rationality that guides him in thoughts and actions. The central claim of naturalized epistemology employed in this paper is that the stimulation of the sensory receptors is all the evidence anybody has had to go on ultimately, in arriving at his picture of the world<sup>2</sup>. In other words, there is a causal connection between our environmental inputs and the beliefs that we form about the world. These beliefs guide our thoughts and actions as humans.

In general, for any human action to qualify as rational, such action should be free or voluntary and intentional. Voluntariness and intentionality distinguish rational human action from that of a storm or erosion. However, some human actions may be voluntary but not intentional, or intentional but not voluntary. Either of these could not be said to be rational. Thus, every rational actor is not only believed to be responsible for such action, he or she is indeed held responsible for it. The fact of responsibility, freedom and intentionality is, however, not in dispute with regards to the terrorist. The troublesome and debatable issue is the rationality of a terrorist's act. He owns up and claims responsibility for such actions, which he of course considers to be free, voluntary and

intentional, and therefore, rational. But, taking rationality as representing a matrix of relations between ‘truth’, ‘objectivity’, ‘universality’ and ‘reality’, the rationality of the terrorist’s action is easily dismissed<sup>3</sup>. What is the nature of those considerations, which constitute the framework of reference for his thoughts and actions? This paper, therefore, analyzes the rational status of the phenomenon of terrorism as well as those considerations that inform the terrorist choice of options. The paper, however, does not seek to address the issue from the point of view of the traditional demand for justification of our actions, as this almost always led to the problem of infinite regress. Rather, the paper seeks an understanding of what is referred to as the “meagre input” that is processed to produce the “torrential output”<sup>4</sup> of the terrorist. There is a linkage between those torrential output or beliefs held by the terrorist and the sensory input. The input may be meagre but the output is torrential in status. And so, it becomes necessary to analyse the processes of belief formation, the belief that informs the terrorist act, and so, embark on possible predictions and preventions. The analysis of these processes of transforming the meagre inputs into torrential outputs square easily within the areas of psychology. It is for this reason that W.V.O. Quine talks about epistemology being a chapter of psychology as a book – in other words, naturalizing epistemology. A way of dealing with the phenomenon of (suicide) terrorism is, perhaps, to locate the communities from which these agents stem, and address the receptivity of people to recruiting organizations. To this end, this paper explores the argument of the naturalized epistemology, to identify and examine the terrorist’s epistemological condition, and hence, a theory of rationality that guides him in his thought and action.

### **Meaning and Nature of Terrorism**

The exact definition of terrorism is rather contentious<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, samples from the US department of defence, FBI, state department, department of justice and the vice-president’s taskforce on combating terrorism all reflect the attempts of different agencies of the US government to pin down the term. According to one of its working definitions, it is the unconventional use of violence for political gains<sup>6</sup>; a strategy of using coordinated attacks that fall outside the laws of war commonly understood to represent the bounds of conventional warfare<sup>7</sup>. According to the United Nations, terrorism is an

anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by individuals, groups, or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons, whereby, the direct targets of violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of the violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic target) from a target population, and serve as message generators<sup>8</sup>. Threat and violence-based communication process between terrorist (organization), imperilled victims, and main targets are used to manipulate the main target, turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought<sup>9</sup>. Thus, terrorist attacks are usually characterized as indiscriminate and executed with no regards for human life. In all, the term ‘terrorism’ is used to describe the political, religious, or ideological violence of an enemy as immoral, wanton, irrational, and unjust. To that extent, states, academics, counter-terrorism experts, and non-governmental organizations see terrorists as actors who do not recognize armed forces, or do not adhere to the universal standard of rationality, and therefore regarded as rogue actors<sup>10</sup>. However, those accused of being terrorists rarely identify themselves as such. Instead, they use terms that refer to their ideological or ethnic struggle, such as separatist, freedom fighter, liberator, militant, guerrilla, rebel, *jihadi* and *mujaheddin* or *fedayeen* (prepared for martyrdom).

According to the United States Department of Defence, terrorism is:

The calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of unlawful violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious or ideological.<sup>11</sup>

There are three key elements within this definition: violence, fear, and intimidation; and each element produces terror in its victims, which is the basic aim of any terrorist activity. However, causing terror in its victims is not an end in itself in any act of terrorism but a means to an end, which often is political<sup>12</sup>. Nevertheless, as we may have noticed in the above definitions, it also includes other ends such as religious, ideological, and intellectual. One of the most recent, devastating and life-claiming terrorist attacks is the September 11, 2001 (9/11) attack of United States of America leading to the destruction of many lives and the World Trade Centre, and the very recent attempt by a

Nigerian-born Farouk Muttalab. In its general sense today, the phenomenon of terrorism has been placed within the context of global discourse in politics, culture analysis, philosophy, religion, and social inquiry.

### **Terrorism and the Idea of Rationality**

At this point, it is pertinent to examine the concept of rationality and its relationship with the phenomenon of terrorism. To be sure, the term ‘rationality’ has been understood through a matrix of relations between ‘truth’, ‘objectivity’, ‘certainty’ and ‘reality’. The notion is here identified with a certain unique framework of principles and methods with reference to which we are to secure truth and objective knowledge: an impartial standpoint for meaningful discussion, appraisal, comparison and judgement<sup>13</sup>. And so, the task of identifying and characterizing this framework is one of the starting points of human knowledge in general – the establishing of a ‘forum of reason’ or ‘court of judgment’ before which all may have equal standing<sup>14</sup>. This forum is established along with a privileged method or sets of methods whose impartial nature and even-handedness would be obvious to, and acknowledged by, all. Thus, the need for a theory of rationality has been generally understood as a call for a single fixed and uniquely authoritative system of ideas and beliefs, the prime exemplar of which we once found in the network of logic and geometry<sup>15</sup>. In this consideration, rationality is located in a shared relation between ideas of objectivity, impartiality and timeless truth, and the merit of a position was identified with its logical coherent. To this extent, the measure of rationality of a system became the validity of the axioms or the formal entailments and logical necessities of the claim on which the system depended<sup>16</sup>. And so, rationality was equated with logicity.

Having identified rationality with a single unchanging universal system of axioms or principles, the question to be discussed here has to be, to what extent does the terrorist’s reference-point stand justified? In other words, what is the point of reference for the justification of the terrorist’s action?

In the semantic history of the notion of rationality, philosophers differed quite considerably. Each looked in a different direction for the ultimate source of the principles<sup>17</sup>. However, despite their detailed disagreement, they all worked with the same

general limitations. Whatever the ultimate source of rationality, all concerned assumed that its principles were, and must be historically invariant. These principles, according to them, are such that they impose themselves on all rational thinkers independently of all historical and cultural experiences. In this regard, only one particular system was uniquely sound in form and content, and to it we must appeal in the interpretation and evaluation of our beliefs, actions and institutions, as well as in adjudicating between conflicting claims<sup>18</sup>. This commitment to one single fix and universal system or principle underscores the very reality which the received view of rationality depicts. By this view, we are provided with a framework of ideals by means of which we are to render discourses commensurable. Rationality is, thus, represented in a grand discourse or a totalizing framework into which all other discourses can be reduced.

In the light of the above, a question looms large: what is the framework of reference against which we are to judge the rationality of the terrorist beliefs and actions? In other words, what constitutes the grand totalizing set of principles, axioms, precepts, and truth against whose background we are able to evaluate the rationality of the phenomenon of terrorism? The underlying assumption here is that the acceptance or refutation of the terrorist's operations and arguments would depend on a justifiable reference point. Put differently, there has to be a logical impartial and coherent relationship between the fundamental beliefs of the terrorist, his action and thoughts, and what we have herein refer to as the received view of rationality.

In the next section of this paper, attempt shall be made to argue that the actions and thoughts of the terrorist are not to be accepted or refuted on the basis of justification, for such an attempt is likely to end up in an infinite regress. Rather, in the alternative epistemology proposed by W.V.O. Quine, we are to examine the phenomenon of terrorism in relation to explanation not justification. In other words, what is the relationship between the environmental input and the torrential output of the mind that constitutes the entirety of the programme of the terrorist?

## Naturalised Epistemology: Understanding a Terrorist's Claim of Rationality

According to W.V.O. Quine,

Epistemology... simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology and hence of natural science. It studies a natural phenomenon, viz., a physical human subject. This human subject is accorded a certain experimentally controlled input... and in the fullness of time the subject delivers as output... The relation between the meager input and the torrential output is a relation that we are prompted to study for somewhat the same reasons that always prompted epistemology: namely, in order to see how evidence relates to theory, and in what ways one's theory of nature transcends any available evidence...But a conspicuous difference between old epistemology and the epistemological enterprise in this new psychological setting is that we can now make free use of empirical psychology.<sup>19</sup>

As stated earlier, this paper does not seek to engage the terrorist nor is it an attempt to analyse the phenomenon of terrorism from the point of view of the traditional demand for epistemic justification. This will not, among other things, escape the attendant charge of arbitrariness from sceptics. Rather, the paper explores argument presented in favour of naturalized epistemology. This variant of epistemology is a philosophical position that encompasses a variety of theories. At their root is a common thread which is the involvement of empirical science in epistemology in rejection of the *a priori*. At its most moderate end is the thesis that epistemology can benefit in its enquiry by using the knowledge we have gained from the cognitive science. In its more extreme sense is the position that traditional epistemology should be abandoned and turned over to the natural sciences.

Naturalized epistemology is opposed to the anti-psychologism of Immanuel Kant, Gottlob Frege, George Hegel, and others. The main components of the thesis of naturalized epistemology are what had been referred to as “meagre input” and “torrential output.”<sup>20</sup> According to the thesis, the stimulation of our sensory receptors is all the evidence anybody has had to go on, ultimately, in arriving at his picture of the world. Put differently, it is concerned with accounts that allow for the possibility that our beliefs about the world are well supported by our sensory evidence, even if they are not

strictly derivable from that evidence. It is an investigation of the causal connections between our sensory evidence and our beliefs about the world, which is not interested in searching for an epistemic support relation between the data and the beliefs as in traditional epistemology but rather searches for the nature of the causal connection between them. Thus, naturalized epistemology attempts to study how humans construct their beliefs about the world, given the sensory stimuli they receive. It, therefore, seeks to explain how torrential output is caused by sensory input – casual relationship between meagre input and torrential output. The meagre input has to do with all that go on in our environment – human, physical, spiritual, sensual and so on. These manifest in the forms of (a) sociological facts which have to do with the position of the agent (in our present discussion, the terrorist); (b) facts of conflicts which have to do with the relationship of the agent to those in power; and (c) facts of ideology which have to do with the differences in ideology and the different goals of the ideologies. These along with other experiential facts ‘invade’ the sense of the agent as input. These are turned in and processed in the agent’s physiological system and comes out as ‘beliefs’ and theories about himself, about others, about the world and about reality.

The existing social order within countries, and the global order of states, includes structural compromises and agreements between various groups and interests. Often, they arose in resolution of past conflicts. Over time, these arrangements may become less relevant to the current situation. New groups and interests may not be foreseen. Liberal democracy itself is intended to prevent small groups redesigning society according to their norms – but then they have to live in a society which they often reject.<sup>21</sup> Some theories assume that groups resort to terrorism when other avenue for change, including economic campaigns, protest, public appeal, and standard warfare, hold no hope of success. This is related to the criterion of *ultima ratio* (last resort), in just war theory. In this perspective, terrorist acts are calculated to disrupt the existing order and provoke conflicts, in the expectation that the outcome will be a new order, more favourable to their interests. This is, crudely, *the seat-at-the-table theory* of terrorism. Applied to anti-terrorism policy, this approach implies policies to create and sustain an alternative, peaceful, avenue of problem resolution, particularly in the case of marginalized and

oppressed populations. Ideological theories, on the other hand, often imply that nothing can be 'resolved', because the conflicting ideologies are logically incompatible.<sup>22</sup>

However, following from the viewpoint of naturalised epistemology, acts of terrorism can be understood and controlled by understanding, regulating and controlling the meagre input, that is, environmental, socio-cultural, religious, and other factors that determines the torrential output – beliefs, theories, information about the world - of the terrorist. Take, for example, a suicide terrorist who strongly holds the following beliefs: that his religious affiliation is the only true form of religion; others who refuse to believe in his religious convictions are infidels; true believers should never be led by an infidel; infidels are to be slaughtered and killed except they accept the only true religion; and finally, if in doing so he martyrs himself, his reward in heaven would be bountiful.

No matter how many of his kind are killed due to such beliefs, convictions, actions, programmes or projects of the terrorist, there is not likely to be an end to the phenomenon of terrorism rather there could be more who are fed with 'relevant' meagre inputs to produce the terrorist's torrential outputs. A viable option is perhaps the understanding of the process of the inculcation of such beliefs into individuals and how it becomes responsible for how they think and act in due time. It would also involve making conscious effort to prevent the (at times forceful) inculcation of said relevant meagre inputs into individuals in their early ages and promoting the inculcation of or socialization into liberal and accommodative attitudes and beliefs into these same individuals. The environment in which we find ourselves play immeasurable role in moulding our beliefs, conducts, and lifestyle.

In such a project, the programme of naturalizing epistemology here considered privileges the selection, analysis and understanding of all environmental conditions regarded as sources of the inputs. This would call for the attention of social scientists, historians, and anthropologists who would sift the conditions of the recipients, and then the attention of the psychologists and psycho-analysts to determine the physiological processes during which the inputs are turned over to the realities of the torrential output. In this lie the gains not of traditional search for justification of actions but for the naturalist's search for the explanations of actions. Once explanations are accomplished,

then predictions are possible, and if predictions are possible, then preventions are realizable.

## **CONCLUSION**

The argument presented in this paper is directed at a proper analysis and appreciation of the terrorist's epistemological condition – the sociological, physical, cultural, religious, ideological and political considerations that inform his thought pattern, form his personality, and produce his actions. For the exponents of naturalized epistemology which include W.V.O. Quine, we should not concern ourselves with the a priori of justification of our actions. Rather, we should concern ourselves with how we come to form the beliefs we hold –priority of belief formation– from those environmental or external input to the beliefs that guide our thoughts and actions. This paper proposes that we undertake to study empirically how people transform environmental/sensory input into torrential output. For Quine, knowledge, and I dare to add, rationality, are the outcome of a process whereby sensory stimulation lead to beliefs/theories about the world. To understand and master the connection between the stimulation and the theories – and to understand how far beyond the stimulation our theories go would be useful in dealing with the terrorist epistemological condition as well as their theory of rationality. To the extent we are able to understand, predict and prevent his acts depends on the extent to which we are able to access, analyze, explain and evaluate the connection between the meagre input and the torrential output that constitute the socio-political, economic, and psychological antecedents and the beliefs, theories and actions that make up the terrorist's programme. And so, it would be repeated here and for the purpose of emphasis that a way of dealing with the phenomenon of terrorism is to get the community from which these agents stem and learn to minimize the receptivity of people to recruiting organizations.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> . The case of the Nigerian-born Farouk Mutallab who attempted to bomb a US aircraft in December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2009, is a good example of someone from a wealthy home without any indication of lack or poverty in his upbringing is a case in hand.

<sup>2</sup> See W.V.O. Quine *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* New York: Columbia University Press, 1969: 82ff.

<sup>3</sup> See M. Crencheaw (1998) “The Logic of Terrorism: Terrorist Behaviour as a Product of Strategic Choice”. In: Walter Reich (ed.) *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*. Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Centre Press 1998: 7 – 24.

<sup>4</sup> . W.V.O. Quine’s epistemological programme presents the strong causal linkage between the “meager input” and “torrential output”.

<sup>5</sup> . See Robi Chakravorti, (1994) ‘Terrorism: Past, present and Future. Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 29, No. 2. 36 (Sep. 3, 1994), 2340 – 2343.

<sup>6</sup> . See F. Jeffrey, 1999, “Actors and Preference in International Relations”. In: D.A. Lake and R. Powel (Eds.) *Strategic Choice and International Relations*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University of Press. 39 – 41.

<sup>7</sup> See W. Laqueur, 2000, *The Age of Terrorism*. Boston: Little Brown 2000: 16

<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia, 2005

<sup>9</sup> Wikipedia, 2005

<sup>10</sup> Wikipedia, 2005

<sup>11</sup> Wikipedia, 2005

<sup>12</sup> . This position is supported by, Mamdani in his work *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* (2004) where he underscores the political undertone of both the origin of modern terrorism and the fight against it (see, Mamdani, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> See D.R. Hilley, 1988, *Philosophy in Question*. In: *Essays on Pyrrhonian Theme*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>14</sup> See Stephen Toulmin, 1972, *Human Understanding Volume I*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. : pg 44

<sup>16</sup> . Ibid. pg 44.

<sup>17</sup> For instance, Rene Descartes locates the source of rationality in the intellect or faculty of reasoning as stated in Emmanuel Kant, while John Locke and Francis Bacon locate the source of rationality in sense observation.

<sup>18</sup> . See Richard J. Bernstein 1988, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

<sup>19</sup> See W.V.O. Quine 1969; 82 – 83.

<sup>20</sup> See W.V.O. Quine 1969, 82 – 83.

<sup>21</sup> See S. Afran.

<sup>22</sup> See S. Afran,

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