Pedagogy and Principled Thinking about War

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I. Introduction

One of the goals of a liberal arts education is to teach students to think in a principled way. Most basically, principled thinking involves the consistent application of one’s principles regardless of particular interests. An area where students are prone to be unprincipled is U.S. foreign policy as it relates to war. It is common for students to come to a discussion about war believing that “we” are the “good guys” and “they” (whoever “they” are) are the “bad guys”. This is particularly prevalent in discussions about terrorism. According to many undergraduate students in my teaching experience, terrorism is what the bad guys do; fighting terrorism is what the good guys do. Jarring this simple paradigm can be an important goal in a class on war and peace.

Recently, I have found that discussing the relationship between terrorism and nuclear deterrence is a useful pedagogical tool in removing this ethnocentrism. The strategy involves showing that a popular conception of terrorism actually leads to the conclusion that nuclear deterrence is itself a form of terrorism. The realization for students that nuclear deterrence is a form of terrorism shatters the prevalent “us and them” mentality. I call this “the terrorist problem for deterrence”.

The problem leads students to reflect on their common sense beliefs because it reveals a contradiction. The contradiction is between the belief that (a) terrorism is always wrong and (b) that nuclear deterrence is permissible. If nuclear deterrence is a form of terrorism, then it is always wrong. Principled thinking about the problem
requires students to come up with solutions. Students often attempt various solutions to the problem. However, the shortcomings of these solutions are easy to point out. Students often realize that terrorism is a more complex phenomena than they imagined and that the U.S. policy of nuclear deterrence is more questionable than they thought. Students are left to grapple with the problem because the philosophical literature has little to say about the relationship between terrorism and nuclear deterrence.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section (II) explains how I present the problem in a classroom setting. Section (III) presents the possible solutions and their drawbacks as part of the dialogue. Section (IV) examines the ways that this exercise can lead students to think in a more principled way. Section (V) ends with some possible philosophical implications.

II. The Terrorism Problem for Deterrence

You don’t have to ask students if they think terrorism is wrong. Asking such a question is likely to give you the same looks as asking “when is it okay to murder a child?” This relationship is not necessarily hyperbolic. One reason murdering children is morally repugnant is that children are innocent. Most people have a fundamental moral intuition that intentionally killing innocent people is wrong. A certain conception of terrorism, called the “tactical definition”, relies on this intuition by tying terrorism to violence against innocent people (or noncombatants).\(^1\) The tactical definition is becoming increasingly popular among political philosophers. One reason for this popularity is that the tactical definition provides moral clarity. If the defining feature of

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\(^1\) Philosopher that hold the tactical definition include Tony Coady, Igor Primoratz, Brian Orend, Stephen Nathanson and Michael Walzer.
terrorism is using violence against innocents, then the wrongness of terrorism becomes apparent. ² Initially, students are drawn to the benefits of moral clarity. If the tactical definition is correct, then there is a straightforward answer to the question, “Why were the attacks on the twin towers wrong?” Answer: they intentionally killed innocent people.

At least the discussion begins in an unproblematic manner. However, the tactical definition of terrorism still needs to be filled out. Otherwise, terrorism would not be distinguished from other forms of violence. Specifying the tactical definition leads to controversy because there are multiple variations of it. Clearly, for pedagogical purposes a definition is necessary. I begin with Stephen Nathanson for reasons that become clear later. Nathanson has four criteria for terrorism. He argues,

Terrorist acts:
1. are acts of serious, deliberate violence or the credible threats of such acts;
2. are committed in order to promote a political or social agenda;
3. generally target limited numbers of people but aim to influence a larger group and/or the leaders who make decisions for the group;
4. intentionally kill or injure innocent people or pose a threat of serious harm to them.³

Importantly, intentionally killing or injuring innocent people is the salient moral property. However, the other features of Nathanson’s view are particularly important. For example, there must be a “communicative element” to terrorism. This feature may be described in various ways. For Igor Primoratz it is “intimidation.”

² As Brian Orend puts it, “terrorism is always impermissible, since it involves the deliberate killing of innocent civilians- which right thinking people view as murder.” See Brian Orend, The Morality of War (Broadview Press, 2006), 70.
³ Stephen Nathanson, Terrorism and the Ethics of War (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 24.
Walzer uses the term “fear.”\(^4\) In short, terrorism terrorizes. One advantage of Nathanson’s account is it leaves the exact characterization of this communicative element open for discussion.

Terrorism is distinctive because it is a form of political violence. Terrorists use violence to achieve social or political goals. These can be as different as establishing a theocratic state or a communist economic structure. Finally, terrorist acts can include credible threats. Planting a chemical weapon in a school, without the intention of actually detonating it, would still count as an act of terrorism on Nathanson’s view.

Nathanson’s definition of terrorism works well in a classroom for three reasons. First, it easily fits paradigm cases of terrorist acts, such as 9/11. Second, it clearly explains the wrongness of terrorism. Third, it is the widest tactical definition of terrorism (as far as I know). In other words, Nathanson’s definition has many conditions that must also be satisfied for an act to be considered terrorism. These sufficient conditions are helpful in highlighting the relationship between terrorism and nuclear deterrence. After a prolonged explanation of these features, I ask, “Would nuclear deterrence count as terrorism?”

This question usually surprises many students. Again, we are talking about “the terrorists,” not the United States. In order to answer the question, nuclear deterrence is defined. I usually begin by asking, “Why do we have nuclear weapons?” Answer: To prevent others from attacking us. Question: “Is that all?” Answer: No, we may also have them to protect things like access to economic goods. Students are quick to pick up on

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the idea of nuclear deterrence. In class, I define it as the threat to use nuclear weapons in order to protect national interests and prevent aggression from other states. Reflecting on the nature of nuclear weapons leads to the conclusion that most nuclear attacks would result in the loss of many innocent lives.

Further, there are good reasons to think that nuclear deterrence fits Nathanson’s definition of terrorism. First, threatening to use nuclear weapons often involves deliberate and serious violence. Also, this threat must be credible to be an effective deterrent. Second, nuclear deterrence has political goals, e.g., the promotion of national interests and preventing aggression. Importantly, self-defense is, by itself, a political goal. Third, nuclear deterents are aimed at influencing political leaders. Finally, nuclear attacks intentionally kill innocent people. It is hard to imagine deploying a nuclear weapon over a city without deliberately killing all the people in the city. From these considerations we can formalize the “terrorist problem”. It is as follows:

(1) Most acts of nuclear deterrence (i) are credible threats of serious violence; (ii) to promote a political agenda; (iii) that influence leaders by targeting a limited group of people; (iv) that intentionally kill innocent people.
(2) Any act that satisfies (i)-(iv) is a terrorist act.
(3) So, most acts of nuclear deterrence are terrorist acts.

This argument shows that Nathanson’s definition of terrorism, along with facts about nuclear deterrence, entail that most nuclear deterents are forms of terrorism. The pedagogical advantage of presenting the formal argument is that it makes these conditions explicit. Any defender of nuclear deterrence must either dispute the facts

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5 Deterrence is defined in political science literature as, “preventing an adversary from taking actions one regards as undesirable by threatening to inflict un acceptable costs on the adversary if the action is taken.” See Phil Williams, Donald Goldstein and Jay Shafritz, “Nuclear Deterrence” in Phil Williams, Donald Goldstein and Jay Shafritz eds. Classical Readings of International Relations (University of Pittsburgh, 1999), 333.
about nuclear threats or reject Nathanson’s definition of terrorism. At this point in the conversation, students are eager to find objections to the argument. If the nuclear deterrence is a terrorist act, then the U.S. would be a terrorist state. As this implication is unacceptable, students attempt to provide solutions to the problem.

III. Objections and Replies

This section is aimed at the dialectical process of responding to possible solutions to the terrorist problem for deterrence. The most likely target of these objections is the second premise, that of the definition of terrorism. As is well known, terrorism is notoriously difficult to define. However, we may not want to scrap the tactical definition so quickly. Again, the tactical definition brings about moral clarity by linking terrorism with the intentional killing of innocent people.

There are three ways to modify the second premise that avoids the conclusion. One may add, remove or substitute conditions to the definition of terrorism. Adding conditions would make the extension of the definition narrower. The more specific our definition of terrorism, the less acts will count as terrorist acts. Subtracting conditions makes the extension broader. The broader the definition, the less distinctive terrorism becomes. For example, if we add that terrorist acts must be directed at citizens of the U.S., then the Irish Republican Army, IRA, never performed a terrorist act. This becomes clearly problematic, as our definition disregards generally accepted historic acts of terrorism. If we say that an act of terrorism is defined only by killing innocent people, then any murder would also be a terrorist act. The difficulty lies in finding the right set of necessary and sufficient conditions that do not lead to misclassifications. Substituting conditions has the potential of both difficulties.
Limiting the possible responses to the terrorist problem for deterrence has the pedagogical benefit of directing the students’ responses. Generally, they are lead to remove conditions from the definition of terrorism. This direction is more easily taken because Nathanson provides many conditions that are possible targets. The pedagogical value of beginning with Nathanson is that he has more sufficient conditions than any other tactical definition of terrorism. The upshot is, generally, removing these conditions makes it broader. So, removing many of the conditions still allows nuclear deterrence to fall under terrorism. For example, suppose we eliminate the communicative feature of Nathanson’s definition. In other words, we don’t require that nuclear threats use fear or intimidation against a limited number of people in order to influence others, e.g., political leaders. In this case, terrorist acts would only have three conditions. Terrorist acts would involve (i) acts of violence or credible threats of such acts (ii) for political purposes; (iii) that target innocent people. Well, most threats to use nuclear weapons also involve (i) - (iii), so most forms of nuclear deterrence would still count as terrorism.

What becomes clear to students is that the strategy of removing conditions is unlikely to succeed unless there is a distinctive element of nuclear deterrence that is different from most acts of terrorism. In this case, the distinctive element is a credible threat. Nathanson claims that threats may count as terrorist acts. He is not alone. However, it is the only condition that can be eliminated from Nathanson’s definition that solves the problem. The solution goes like this: There is a big difference between a threat and a physical action. Usually the student that first proposes this

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6 Igor Primoratz’s influential definition also explicitly includes threats to use violence. See Primoratz, “What is Terrorism?”. 
solution is greeted with a sigh of relief by the others. I usually do all that I can to initially bolster this confidence. I refer them to Tony Coady’s principle that states, “The threat to do X is generally not an instance of X.”\(^7\) Threatening to hurt someone is not the same thing as actually hurting someone. Right? However, this confidence dissipates when I present “the drones case.”

It goes like this: Suppose that we wake up one morning and see drones flying above every major U.S. city. We are informed that Al Qaeda has armed each drone with a nuclear warhead that will detonate if fired upon. In this case, the U.S. capitulates to Al Qaeda’s demands and no bombs are dropped. Does this count as an act of terrorism? If it is not an act of terrorism, then what is it?

The counter-example poses two difficulties. First, intuitively it would count as an act of terrorism. In fact, an alternative way of presenting the problem begins with “the drones case” and asks students whether it counts as an act of terrorism. This leaves them in a lurch when they want to remove threats from the tactical definition. Examples like this are the reason for including threats in the first place. Second, it means that we must come up with a new category for this action. If it is not an act of war, nor an instance of terrorism, then what kind of act is it?

At this point, perceptive students may pick up the nugget I left for them earlier. Coady’s principle implies that a threat to perform a terrorist act is not an instance of terrorism. Threats may be in a category all to themselves. So, there are threats to lie, cheat and steal and then there is lying, cheating and stealing. The idea is that the

argument conflates threats of specific actions with the action itself. This solution is tempting for students; however, I believe it ultimately fails.

Distinguishing threats of terrorism from acts of terrorism may alter the problem, but will not resolve it. Take bullying. The threat of bullying is arguably an instance of bullying. The purpose of bullying is to cause fear and intimidation for some sort of personal satisfaction. Credible threats can serve this purpose, as well as their fulfillment. So, the threat of bullying is a counter-example to the principle that “A threat of X is not an instance of X.” More importantly, it is a relevant counter-example. Similar reasons can be given for including threats as part of the definition of terrorism. In some cases, threats to engage in terrorist actions can achieve the same political goals as acts of terrorism. In other words, there are exceptions to this category distinction that are relevantly similar to cases of terrorism. But even if the distinction between threats and other actions goes unchallenged, the problem is still not resolved. Take this revised version of the problem:

(1) Most acts of nuclear deterrence (i) are credible threats of serious violence; (ii) to promote a political agenda; (iii) that influence leaders by targeting a limited group of people; (iv) that intentionally kill innocent people.
(2) Any act that satisfies (i)-(iv) is a terrorist threat.
(3) So, most acts of nuclear deterrence are terrorist threats.

The revised argument makes the distinction between acts that are threats and acts that are not. It does not presuppose that a terrorist threat is an instance of terrorism. Once we have established that nuclear deterrence constitutes a terrorist threat, then we may ask whether or not terrorist threats are generally wrong. Notice that threats of terrorism need not be morally equivalent to terrorism itself. It may merely have the same scope. For
example, torturing an innocent people to death is considered by most to be worse than merely murdering them. However, both are (at the least) generally wrong. So if terrorist threats are generally wrong and most acts of nuclear deterrence are terrorist threats, then most acts of nuclear deterrence are generally wrong. The problem remains.

A more promising strategy involves looking at certain important differences between most terrorist acts and nuclear deterrence. Nuclear deterrence merely involves a threat. Further, this threat is supposed to be in response to the undesirable actions of another state. We can say that nuclear deterrence is purely retaliatory. On the other hand, terrorism need not be merely retaliatory. The proposed solution involves highlighting this difference. If we add a non-retaliatory aspect to the definition, does that solve the problem? Not unless we are willing to reject paradigm cases of terrorism. For example, any deliberate attack on civilians by Al Qaeda in response to the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan would not be considered a terrorist attack. Also, in the case of 9/11, Osama bin Laden considered the attacks retaliatory, as the U.S. continually acts in ways that are undesirable to Islamic militants. Further, it is arguable that many terrorist acts are a response to unjust economic policies. In any case, limiting terrorism to non-retaliatory acts of violence would be too limiting.

Students are often less than fully convinced because there still remains one large difference between most terrorists and the U.S. Terrorists are merely individuals or groups. The U.S. is a legitimate world power. Here it seems that we may confront one of the motivations for unprincipled thinking head on. Students often are quite willing to limit terrorists to non-state actors. In other words, there are no terrorist states. However,

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this confidence dissipates when confronted with clear examples of state terrorism. Michael Walzer cites the Argentine “disappearances” as an example of state terrorism. Hypothetical instances also work well. Take the “Taliban 9/11 case”. Imagine that we find out in the future that Al Qaeda had nothing to do with 9/11. Instead, the leaders of Afghanistan, the Taliban, were wholly responsible. Would this mean that 9/11 was not an act of terrorism? Surely not. Again, it is this final example that requires students to face the problem head on.

It should be clear that there is little reason to believe that states cannot, by definition, engage in terrorism. Additionally, a survey of the facts shows actual instances of state terrorism. Responding to this argument by removing states by fiat reveals the strong bias in our culture of uncritically thinking through the implications of U.S. foreign policy. Of course, some students remain un-phased by this exercise and retain full faith in the integrity of the United States. The majority of students, however, often emerge from this discussion with a more complex view of the world. In the next section, I lay out some of the ways that this discussion can lead to further development.

IV. Pedagogical Implications

Generally, the problem remains perplexing. Students must wrestle with rejecting the universal wrongness of terrorism or the strategy of nuclear deterrence. Rather than forcing them to resolve the contradiction by choosing a side, I move the discussion to other relevant issues in U.S. foreign policy. The important feature of this technique is its

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9 Walzer, “Five Questions About Terrorism”.

indirect methodology. Students are not given direct evidence of questionable U.S. actions. Rather, they are merely given the difficulty of having to work through their own conflicting intuitions. In my experience, students that strongly believe in the moral superiority of the United States become more defensive when this bias is directly challenged. However, when placed in conflict with an equally strong revulsion against terrorism, these initial defenses wane. This becomes a natural segue to discuss the arguments against nuclear deterrence and actual use of nuclear weapons in WWII.

In the case of nuclear deterrence, I may choose to present other arguments against nuclear deterrence. Students are more likely to be receptive to such arguments after wrestling with the previous problem. Additionally, I find it helpful to critique the bombing of Hiroshima in WWII. If nuclear deterrence itself is a terrorist act, then surely the bombing of Hiroshima also counts as one.

Threatening to kill innocent people may be wrong; actually doing it is worse. Generally, the off the cuff defenses to Hiroshima do not seem as persuasive after a prolonged comparison between nuclear deterrence and terrorism. The argument is even easier to make because it does not involve the distinction between threats and actions. Once students understand that the bombs intentionally killed innocent people for political purposes, Hiroshima suddenly looks like a clear act of terrorism. Again, I find Nathanson’s work helpful. He devotes a chapter explaining why condemnations of terrorism lack credibility when they are biased. One way to be biased, he argues, is to condemn terrorism and naively defend the nuclear attacks in WWII. Pointing this out to students provides some motivations for principled thinking.

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11 Nathanson, *Terrorism and the Ethics of War*, 86.
If students want their condemnations of terrorism to be taken seriously by others, then they must apply those same standards to themselves. In other words, if they accept the tactical definition of terrorism, then a principled stance requires condemning any U.S. action that falls under that definition. Whereas students may have been willing to uncritically defend the bombing of Hiroshima, they realize that doing so can result in their condemnations of terrorism lacking credibility. Of course, students aren’t magically turned into critical thinkers overnight, as a shift in paradigm takes time and patience. However, there is a benefit to showing students how a simple argument may reveal the world to be much more complex. Further, such a process engages them in the activity of thinking in a principled way about the methods in which our national interests are defended.

Section V: Philosophical Implications

Beyond its pedagogical usefulness, the terrorist problem for nuclear deterrence may also hold philosophical value. There is little discussion in the literature regarding the relationship between the two. However, the terrorist problem for nuclear deterrence applies to most of the tactical definitions of terrorism. In this section I argue that the inclusion or exclusion of threats in the definition of terrorism is the crux of the problem. I end by suggesting some further areas of research.

Although Nathanson’s definition of terrorism is useful for pedagogical purposes, one may find it inferior to other formulations of the tactical definition. The universal feature of the tactical definition of terrorism is that it kills innocent people for political purposes. Beyond that fundamental agreement, defenders of the tactical definition
disagree. For example, Walzer and Orend think that terrorism kills innocent people indiscriminately rather than intentionally.\footnote{See Walzer, “Five Questions About Terrorism” and Orend, The Morality of War.} Coady does not include any language of randomness or intentionality, but does include attacks on property.\footnote{Coady, “Defining Terrorism”.} Primoratz retains the language of intentionally killing innocent people, but excludes attacks on property.\footnote{Primoratz, “What is Terrorism?”.} Importantly, none of these variations is relevant to nuclear deterrence. Nuclear weapons kill innocent people indiscriminately and also destroy property. Although, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss each definition in detail, none of the prominent tactical definitions of terrorism avoid the problem.

Most threats to use nuclear weapons include the possibility of killing innocent people for political purposes. So, every definition of terrorism that includes a threat to kill innocent people for political purposes entails that, in general, a threat to use nuclear weapons is terrorism. The only exception would be definitions that add conditions precluding this inference.\footnote{Certain definitions include the requirement that only non-state groups can perform terrorist actions. This condition would distinguish terrorism from nuclear deterrence. This definition, however, has been criticized extensively. See} None of the tactical definitions include such a criterion. Each definition is based on the killing of innocent people for political purposes. The primary disagreement is whether or not threats are included in the definition of terrorism. This disagreement has not been considered very important. Tony Coady, who excludes threats, says,
This [his definition] might be thought too restrictive in one direction since the threat to use such violence, even where the violence does not result, would be regarded by some as an instance of terrorism. If you think that plausible, you could amend the definition accordingly.\textsuperscript{16}

However, Coady does not consider the possible implications regarding nuclear deterrence. The preceding section should show, at least, that the issue of threats is not trivial. There is very little literature on this topic. The rare exception is the work of Douglas Lackey.

Lackey argues that nuclear deterrence \textit{is} a form of terrorism. He relies on a principle that claims that the moral character of an action “rubs off” on threats to perform it. As he puts it, “The moral character of the threat to do X, if one is not bluffing, is found in the character of X. The moral character of X rubs off on sincere threats to do it.”\textsuperscript{17} This principle explains why we should consider threats of violence to be wrong. The moral character of violence is included in violent threats. So, if acting violently is wrong, then threatening violence is wrong. Lackey does a good job presenting reasons to judge terrorist threats similarly to terrorist actions. However, his argument still does not render the conclusion that terrorist threats \textit{are} terrorist actions. It is possible for something to have the same moral character without being the same thing. Perhaps Lackey has given a reason to believe that terrorist threats are wrong. But this does not resolve the issue of whether or not terrorist threats are instances of terrorism.

The only philosopher (I know of) that gives reasons to exclude threats from the definition of terrorism is Tony Coady. As mentioned above, he bases his argument on

\textsuperscript{16} Coady, “Defining Terrorism”.
the principle that “A threat to do X is not, itself, an instance of X.” The principle has the obvious implication that threats of terrorism are not instances of terrorism. As I argued above, the principle is not exception-less. In fact, Coady does not present it as an absolutely universal principle. If the principle admits of exceptions, then it is possible to think that terrorism, including nuclear deterrence, is one of them. In other words, Coady does not succeed in eliminating threats from the definition of terrorism unless he can show that his principle is without exceptions. Otherwise, those motivated to include threats in their definition will consider terrorism to be such an exception. To resolve the issue, one would either have to present an argument that separated all threats from other actions, or one would have to present an argument for excluding threats from the definition of terrorism itself. Neither of these tasks has been attempted.

In conclusion, investigation of the relationship between terrorism and nuclear deterrence is both philosophically and pedagogically useful. Philosophically speaking, most tactical definitions of terrorism imply that nuclear deterrence is a form of terrorism. This possibly misclassifies nuclear deterrence and/or inadvertently shows that nuclear deterrence is unjustified. Pedagogically, presenting the problem to students requires them to deal with foreign policy in a more complex way. Further research on this topic could be a benefit to philosophy and pedagogy, as well as the general society in terms of how citizens classify U.S. actions both past and present.