

Book Review: Terrorism: A Philosophical Enquiry

by Blog Admin

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Anne Schwenkenbecher examines the most urgent philosophical questions pertaining to the problem of terrorism: What is terrorism, or, how should it be defined? And could terrorism ever be justified? The book questions well established frameworks and widely held convictions: it denies that terrorism is always wrong and morally worse than war. It invites the reader to approach these matters from a new perspective, according to which terrorism is just one of many forms of political violence. **Jacob Phillips** finds that the book offers genuinely informative insights into the gulf between a proper philosophical understanding of the word terrorism and its popular usage.



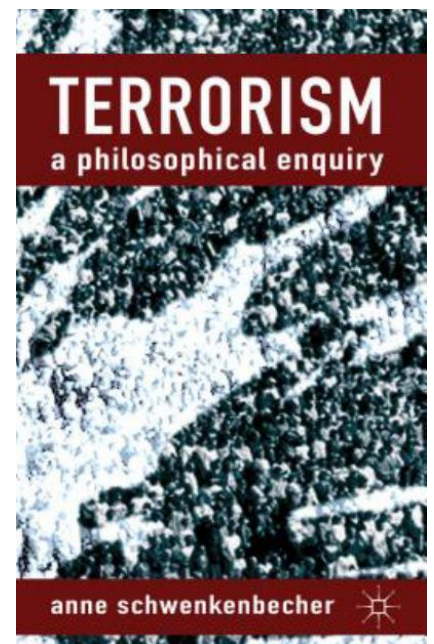
**Terrorism: A Philosophical Enquiry. Anne Schwenkenbecher.
Palgrave Macmillan. August 2012.**

It is hardly uncommon to find words which crop-up often in conversation have different meanings in the academy. In philosophy, such words could include 'intuition', or 'substance', both of which have a rich philosophical history running somewhat concurrently to their daily parlance, a fact of no real consequence. With the word 'terrorism', however, the lack of a firm definition is problematic. This is a serious issue in law, where it is a necessary component of legal judgements. Indeed, [Anne Schwenkenbecher](#) points out that the motivation for her philosophical enquiry into terrorism is to try and pin down a term which, in legal discourse, has over a hundred definitions on offer.

As well as this, Schwenkenbecher's endeavour is even more justified when one calls to mind the use of the word terrorism, or, 'terror', in political rhetoric and mass media. It is on this point that Schwenkenbecher's enquiry offers substantial rewards. In short, if a word like terrorism is being used rhetorically to sanction, mandate or even justify foreign policy decisions, it is crucial that people understand what, exactly, is meant by the term. It is the pursuit of an answer to this question which constitutes the first section of this book.

There are various hot-potato issues in defining terrorism which have been given a great deal of attention in academic discourse. Two obvious examples include whether terrorism is *by definition* not enacted by state agents, that is, governments, and whether or not terrorism necessarily involves harming innocents. With sound reasoning, Schwenkenbecher responds negatively to these contentious points, and settles on a definition which offers a notion of terrorism which can be enacted by state and non-state agents, and need not necessarily target innocents.

Schwenkenbecher sets out to define a word which is thrown around in political rhetoric in ways she considers manipulative. It is, we read, used to invoke certain strong reactions among people, such as anger or fear, which provides a fertile hotbed for politicians to try and justify their actions. By constructing a definition of terrorism which does not include such an overtly unethical component as the harm of innocents, then, the implication is that the heat can be turned down a bit in the rhetoric surrounding terrorist acts, and, ultimately, we might be able to bring to light some of the more worrying instances of manipulation. On this front, Schwenkenbecher's definition is worthy of praise – and indeed, a close reading of this text will throw the discourse surrounding certain major terrorist events into a very different light.



The bulk of this book concentrates on the more complex business of asking: is a terrorist act ever permissible? The basic framework for this analysis is just war theory. According to just war theory, given certain caveats, there are times when it is right for one group of people to go to war against another. Such caveats include, for example, using war only as a last resort. Through a rigorous discussion, Schwenkenbecher finds that applying just war theory to terrorist acts does allow one to suggest that terrorist acts are, at least in theory, justified. This 'in theory' is significant. Schwenkenbecher is not saying that any particular act is *in practice* just. It is a case of using just war theory as a framework for providing balanced judgements about specific instances of terrorism. It might well be that no terrorist act actually fulfils every caveat, but if the agents behind a terrorist act have, say, clearly used violence as the very last resort, this is an important aspect in the work of evaluating it. Indeed, the case studies in the book, including discussions of the Basque separatists ETA, and the ANC military wing Umkhonto we Sizwe, exhibit such a procedure.

The idea of seeking to arrive at a dispassionate definition points to the methodological commitments which underlie this book. The philosophical nature of this enquiry is, largely, Anglo-American-style analytic philosophy. This is not to say Schwenkenbecher does not have an eye on empirical events, which she clearly does, but the book has a grounding presupposition that to understand 'terrorism' philosophically means to remove oneself from human involvement in the subject matter, to build a robust, universal definition, and then to analyse, conceptually, how this definition might clear the way for understanding the permissibility of terrorist acts. In and of itself, the use of a tight analytic method is certainly not something to be criticised *per se*. Indeed, there is probably no better way to establish definitions of terms and embark on conceptual analysis.

On this front, Schwenkenbecher's work is highly accomplished. However, looking at the broader picture, there are points where the conceptual analysis might benefit from being supplemented by other considerations. In general terms, the use of algebraic reasoning for human events is indicative of the conceptual coldness in analytic procedure, such as using the letter 'B' to indicate an ethnic minority group who are the victim of an attempt at systematic genocide (p. 60). Squeezing the deaths of human beings into the cipher 'B' for reasons of conceptual analysis does grate a little, and one wonders if the use of a more human mode of discourse would provide further ways to look at these issues. Another example is the discussion of collective responsibility. The complexity of outlining to what degree certain members of a society are complicit in its injustices, is not really given enough attention here. This discussion could benefit from having conceptual analysis supplemented by other considerations, not least, the fact that those outside Western society, the very notion of collective responsibility is very different indeed to that espoused by the more individualistic nations, despite the latter's conceptually grounded presumption of universality.

But, these are minor points. Overall this book offers an impressive academic analysis, written in a clear and readable style whilst offering genuinely informative insight into the gulf between a proper philosophical understanding of the word terrorism and its popular usage.

Jacob Phillips is doing a PhD at King's College London. His research interests include human subjectivity in continental philosophy and systematic theology, German philosophy, the role of the humanities in contemporary society and the academy in public life. He enjoys reading and writing more broadly on various aspects of art, literature, philosophy and religion. [Read more reviews by Jacob.](#)

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