

**Georg Meggle**  
 Commentary to Ted Honderich's lecture "Is there a Right to Terrorism ?"

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0 Introduction

I agree with Ted Honderich in most of his political worldviews. I, too, consider the present politics of Israel towards Palestinians a crime; I, too, consider Sharon and George W. Bush, who covers for him, to be contemporaries who shouldn't stand at the head of democracies but rather in front of an international court of law; I, too, dream of the day in which a free and sovereign Palestine exists as a friendly neighbour to an Israel blessed with the same characteristics. And I share his view that for the Germans knowing the crimes of the generation of their fathers, respectively grandfathers, cannot be an excuse for their silence towards the injustice committed by Israel to Palestine.

Even Honderich's assessment of the moral legitimacy of a Palestinian terrorism I can share to a large degree. But not wholly. Where does this common ground end ? It is my first goal to explain this to him and to you.

1 The Map

The core of your ethics, Ted, is the *Principle of Humanity*: Help eliminate or reduce unnecessary suffering. It is, as I understand you and according to my own view, as well, sometimes only possible to do so by using violence as a means to this end. Violence serving this end can be morally justifiable. In example in cases of self-defence; in cases of individual, as well as collective self-defence.

The Principle of Humanity itself and the possible justification of violence by it, are not my concern, here. I concentrate on the next two steps: On the application of this kind of justification of violence in regards to terrorism in general; and on the Palestinian terrorism as a special case.

2 The Primary Mistake: Lack of Differentiation

Are there situations in which terrorism can be justified - and justified with the principle of humanity in mind ? Your answer, Ted, is a clear yes. This answer is too unilateral for me. The right answer should have, according to me, two sides: a yes and a no. That is not a contradiction. Because there are two kinds of terrorism - at whom the violence is directed makes the difference. One has to distinguish between a weak and a strong terrorism. The weak terrorism is one which targets the oppressors and only them. Best example: just Guerrilla warfare. The strong terrorism is a terrorism which targets a third party, namely innocents -- children, in example. It targets, say,

Palestinian children; or Israeli children. Without exception: Child is child.

The ordinary use of the word “terrorism” in politics and the media doesn’t tell these two cases apart. Both is “terrorism” - end of story. This comes in handy for many anti-terrorists. Because a no to the strong terrorism easily leads to a no to the weak one. The reversal of this, though, holds, too - - and that is the danger: a yes to weak terrorism leads just too fast to a yes concerning strong terrorism. In this case the gravity of the inclined plane starts to pull.

By stating this, I accuse you, Ted, of just this mistake. You do not tell the two forms of terrorism apart, you do not differentiate sharply, not clear enough.

Your legitimization of terrorism might hold for weak terrorism. But not for strong terrorism. Without a doubt you consider weak terrorism legitimated under certain conditions: in fact if this terrorism serves the principle of humanity, that is, eliminates great misery or aims at doing so, if it is, at the same time, the ultima ratio, if it promises to be effective, efficient and its effects long-lasting. Let this be the case. But should this suffice - according to you - to also legitimise strong terrorism ? Should you be allowed to kill children to save one’s people - kill them intentionally and deliberately?

I am not sure as of now whether you really want to say so.

Let’s discuss this by using one of your examples, the one which seems to closest approximate the justification of strong terrorism.

You compare in this example the Palestinian and the Israeli terror and you differentiate them. Let me quote from your lecture:

- (P) *Think now the killing of an Israeli child by a Palestinian suicide-bomber.*
- (I) *Think too of the killing of a Palestinian child by an Israeli airforce officer from a helicopter gunship.*

*He (the Israeli) says of course that he would have chosen, if he could, to kill only the HAMAS terrorist near the child. The Palestinian suicide-bomber says effectively the same sort of thing, presumably as truly.*

*It (Ted Honderich’s book “After the Terror) answered that the Palestinian sucidide-bomber does have a moral right to her act of terrorism, and that the Israeli in the helicopter has no moral right to his act of state-terrorism. (...)*  
*<But> it is the answer I continue to defend.*

That these two would have rather chosen to do something different makes them equal, according to you. I deny this fact already. What both would have liked to do, is - with regards to morals - completely irrelevant. Maybe a murderer would have liked to get the money of his victim in a different way. His murder is still a murder.

It is not relevant what the perpetrators would have rather liked to do; the only thing relevant is what they really *did do* and whether they knew or should have been expected to know that their course of action would kill the child, too. Should they know this, both of their acts are equally reprehensible.

Let's follow your request and think together of "the killing of an Israeli child by a Palestinian suicide bomber". How is this "killing" to be understood precisely? In the weak sense of (A), or in the horribly strong sense of (B)?

- (A) The bomb aimed at an Israeli border-patrol - and the explosion brought the child to death, too.
- (B) The bomb very deliberately aimed (also) at tearing apart the Israeli child.

(A) stands on the same moral level with the "collateral damage" caused by the Israeli. (B) is plainly a crime, no matter who commits this crime.

Ted, in which sense is this assertion which you yourself rightly call "terrible and horrible" -- the assertion that the Palestinian suicide-bomber had a right to her act -- to be understood? This is really not clear to me, so far. I want to know it now - you tell me. Do you actually think that it is to be understood in the sense of (B), that is in the sense of a justification of strong terrorism?

I pose this question deliberately in such a way that the clearest answer can only be a simple yes or no.

### 3 The Second Mistake: Lack of Realism

My second point has to do with the central premise of your justification of terrorism. Let us assume that we have already accepted your Principle of Humanity as the core of our ethics -- and we have accepted also, that this principle can be served sometimes by use of violence, only. Your next step in justification was this:

- R *If this violence serves its humanitarian end only if it takes the form of terrorist Violence (and the other frame conditions mentioned above apply, as well), then terrorism can be morally permissible, it might even be a moral obligation.*

I easily agree with your *if-then* sentence. For one simple reason: I find it terribly hard to believe that its *if-sentence* will ever hold in reality. That its conditions will be actually fulfilled. Not, if the terrorism of concern in it is to be understood as strong terrorism.

Do you really believe in it? Then, you would be the first person I ever met who really believes that humanity can be bombed into the world by murdering children. And let's not be mistaken: We do not talk about single cases, then, but we talk about murdering children as a strategy. Was such a strategy ever successful? A second thing needs to be kept in mind, one which I probably need not call to your attention: This is about humanity as a whole; not just about the humanity of a certain group. Otherwise, we would not be speaking about moral, at all.

### 4 Further Questions

Obviously, I have a number of other questions. For example, how the success of terrorism should be measured; who would judge success or lack of success; whether,

according to your own judgement, the terror of September 11, then, and depending on who launched it, would not have to be considered the most successful act of terrorism in all of history, etc. etc.

I am anxious to hear your response.

*(translated from the German by Beatrice Kobow)*