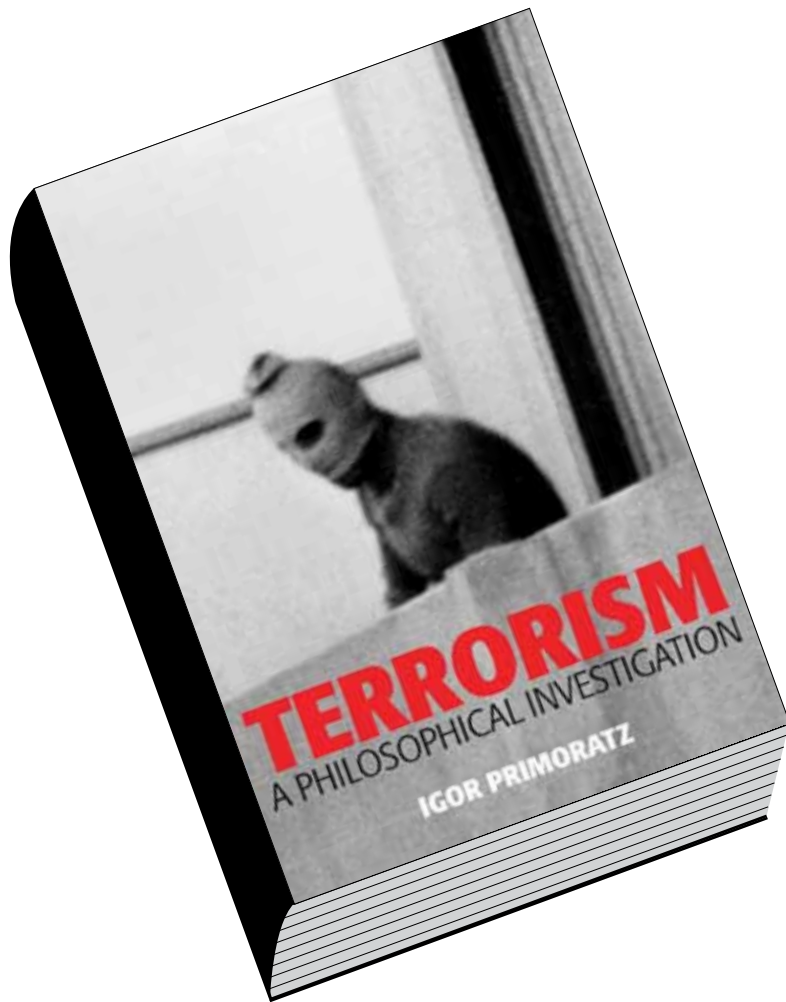


# Justifiable acts? Let's see now

An analysis of violence using the logic of right and wrong impresses and educates Ted Honderich



## Terrorism: A Philosophical Investigation

By Igor Primoratz

Polity, 224pp, £55.00 and £16.99  
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This is probably the best book on terrorism that there is. That is a judgement with respect to books in English and on the subject presupposed by the rest of the stuff on terrorism, which is the subject of the wrong and right of it. This is not to say that the book agrees with me, or that it agrees with you. It is to say that Igor Primoratz, of a place you may not have heard of, Charles Sturt University, would be translated to Harvard University or the University of Oxford save for the pro-Semitic

and anti-Semitic prejudices or deferences of both those places. It is to say that the book should be compulsory correction of the moral limitation of most members of the American and British political class.

It is a book of philosophy in its great tradition, which is to say concentration on the logic of ordinary intelligence. It is, then, concentration on clarity, usually by way of analysis, and consistency and validity, and completeness. The book in particular is moral philosophy in its great tradition, which is the logic of wrong and right. The book is nothing less than that, say merely "the ontology of the moral" or whether if there is pain in your life it would be better if you did not exist, issues currently trou-

bling the seminar in moral philosophy in the second mentioned of our own universities.

Primoratz's first chapter is still essential, on definition. He defines terrorism as being four things: violence, against innocents, intimidation and coercion. If this is out of sight of what is presupposed weekly in the chatter of the Senate and the House of Commons, it is not accompanied by the dismal assumption that it is a simple truth of fact.

His second chapter is about one thing that terrorism as defined includes, which is state terrorism. His principal conclusion is that it is morally worse than other terrorism, morally worse in terms

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of his ordinary but reflective decent commitments.

His third, fourth and fifth subjects are the general arguments for terrorism. They are that the common citizens who are its victims are not really innocent, that despite their innocence there are consequences of terrorism that outweigh the bad, and that the injustice to these victims is outweighed by greater injustices to which the terrorism is directed. These general arguments are not merely bad-mouthed but defeated.

The sixth passage of argument is on the still general but reluctant view that there can be circumstances of supreme emergency in which terrorism, probably state terrorism, is justified. Primoratz accepts a more restricted view, having to do with what he calls the avoidance of moral disaster. Terrorism is almost absolutely wrong but, seventhly, not distinctively wrong.

We end with two particular case studies. The first is of our terror bombing of Germany in the Second World War, which Primoratz's definition of his subject should not allow him to avoid calling terrorist war. The second is of the terrorism of the state of Israel and of the Palestin-

ians. Both are condemned with persistent argument and passion.

This summary of mine gives you nothing much of the lovely reality of the book, which is sustained clarity, consistency and not leaving things out. It is calmly resolute. No cant in its passion, only plain English. It is out of sight of tedious liberal vacuity. It is not pious stuff from a department of peace studies. It is not intoning about hierarchic democracy. If it may strain the powers of concentration of an ordinary coalition MP or an ordinary congressman, and be too much for a minister of education, it only asks more independent intelligence and a little diligence. It is worth disagreeing with.

The matter of definition, putting aside the practical problem of the obvious inanities, remains difficult. I do not agree that a definition of terrorism is decent if it imputes special lowness to it by passing over the closeness of terrorism to war with respect to the facts of war's foreseen and hence intentional killing of innocents and its purposes of intimidation and coercion.

I myself am educated by Primoratz, made more uncertain. But I hold to the view that an articulated general principle of right and wrong is needed for consistent enquiry into terrorism, say the Principle of Humanity. I hold, too, to the defence of two terrorisms, derived from that principle, the first seemingly condemned and the second explicitly condemned by Primoratz. The first was the terrorism of Zionism, the project as distinct from any other intention of a home for the Jewish people in Israel's 1948-67 borders. The second is Palestinian terrorism against neo-Zionism, the violation of the Palestinians in the last one-fifth of their indigenous homeland.

The book is not either what it calls ideology or consequentialism – the latter being that the end and the means justify the means. The Principle of Humanity is in both categories.

Ted Honderich is Grote professor emeritus of philosophy of mind and logic, University College London. He is author of *Terrorism for Humanity: Inquiries into Political Philosophy* (2003) and *Humanity, Terrorism, Terrorist War: Palestine, 9/11, Iraq, 7/7* (2006), and editor of *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (1995 and 2005).