Most of us would intuitively agree that violence is evil, that terrorist assaults on innocent civilians are wicked, and that war is something to be avoided. But why are violence, terrorism, and war so bad? If they are so bad, what can be done to stop them? And why, if most of us agree they are bad, do they continue to afflict human societies? These perennial questions are brought into focus by the violent events continuing to unfold around us as we speak: the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the impending war with Iraq.

I take the position that violence is such an evil and our ability to control it and justify it is so limited that we must err on the side of peace. I call my position practical pacifism. It results from modesty about our ability to justify violence and, although it isn’t absolutely opposed to violence, it is based upon a presumption toward peace. This position follows from a Socratic recognition that human beings are fallible and ignorant and that we often suffer from pride and weakness of will. If we admit this point, we must admit that even though some uses of violence might be justified in theory, it will be extremely difficult for human beings to ensure, in practice, that the use of violence is in fact justified. This all follows from a basic commitment to humanism. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that efforts to justify violence in terms of the just war tradition or even in light of recent terrorism are connected with eschatological religions. A humanist approach is skeptical about the justificatory arguments of those religions that claim access to a divine order. In rejecting human access to a divine order of justification, however, one need not retreat to relativism. Rather one can remain committed to the idea that some forms of violence may be justifiable and that there is some absolute and objective moral standard. A humanist should nonetheless admit that fallible mortals usually don’t have sufficient information to ensure that specific uses of violence are in fact justified.

The basic question “Why is violence bad?” may seem trivial, even nonsensical. However, answering it will help us work toward properly understanding the subject. I will begin by stipulating a definition: violence is the deliberate use of destructive force by a human agent. I want to avoid using the term violent to describe other uses of destructive force that aren’t deliberate. I realize this runs counter to some of our ordinary usages of the word, but I make this stipulation in the hope of remaining clear about the phenomenon to be discussed. There can be justified and unjustified violence. “Unjustified” violence is a use of destructive force that doesn’t serve some higher purpose and isn’t consented to by concerned parties. It is possible that there are justified uses of destructive force. For example, my doctor would be warranted in amputating my arm if the arm were infected with life-threatening gangrene or some other disease. In this case the action, although destructive, would be justified because it serves the higher end of preserving my health. Moreover, I would in fact consent to the operation. If I were unconscious or incapacitated in some way, this operation would be justified if my wife were to approve the surgery for me. Here, the important factor is that my wife’s permission is based upon the assumption that I would consent to the operation if it were possible.
An unjustified use of destructive force would then be one that didn't serve a higher purpose and in which the individuals concerned wouldn't approve.

The difficulty here has to do with the question of "higher purposes." The just war tradition holds that destructive force can be used if a higher purpose can be shown. For example, we usually don't consider self-defense or the use of police force to be violence per se; rather, we say that these are justified uses of force. The question of justification and the definition of the higher good is, therefore, the crux of the matter. This comes up in rhetorical questions about what to call certain destructive activities. We condemn "terrorists" while we fight a "war on terrorism." For those who support al-Qaeda or the Palestinians, however, "terrorists" are "freedom fighters" or "martyrs." Indeed, the United States has supported "freedom fighters" in Central America and Afghanistan whose destructive power was argued for the higher cause they were said to serve. From the opposite side, of course, these cohorts looked like violent terrorists. The word martyr used by supporters of recent suicide bombers is telling and assumes that the suicide bomber is dying for a higher cause, that his or her use of destructive force is justified.

So, the crucial philosophical question is whether there is an absolute set of values by which the question of justification of violence could finally be resolved. Proponents of the just war doctrine assume that there exists such an absolute perspective often linked to God as the foundational source of values. Opposed to this view is a perspective that holds that there is no absolute set of values. The question of justification is thus reduced to a political and rhetorical contest. Such a view is called relativism. For the relativist justification, if there is such a thing, is either egoistic ("my use of violence—or my country's—is justified because it is mine") or polemical ("might makes right").

I defend a third option. I maintain with the absolutists that there are justified uses of violence. However, I further maintain that human beings usually don't have certainty about the justification of violence and that human beings don't possess enough self-control to make sure that violence is contained. Catholic thinker Paul Griffiths recently argued the first point, maintaining it is immodest for human beings to assume that they know when they are justified in using violence. This view, which grows out of the Catholic approach to just war theory, puts such a severe burden of proof on those who would use violence that this becomes a form of "paciﬁsm in practice." In essence, it is the humanistic practical paciﬁsm I defend. Many other thinkers about violence have made the second point. Rene Girard, for example, provides us with a useful metaphor. He says violence is like a contagion—it tends to spread as violence begets vengeance in an ever increasing circle. From Girard's perspective, violence will continue to infect a community until it is constrained by religious taboos or deflected by the use of surrogates for violence. Jonathan Glover has made a similar point with regard to what he calls "military drift" and the tendency of minor acts of violence such as economic sanctions to give way to more and more violent acts. My point here is quite simple: although there are cases when violence can be justified, human beings don't usually possess enough knowledge or self-control to administer it justly. I use the adverb usually here to indicate that in some circumstances it is possible to use violence wisely. Given human fallibility, however, the burden of proof rests on those who would use violence. They must show that they are certain it is justified and won't be misused, spread, or escalate. If violence is really evil, if it is really a contagion, and if the perpetrators of unjustified violence are really wicked, then we must be extremely careful about using it. There is thus a practical presumption against violence. I presume that violence is bad and that its deliberate use is something to be avoided. The burden of proof then rests on those who claim that some forms of violence can be justified.

It's very difficult for us to separate our selfish political interests from efforts to warrant violence, and sometimes this is simply a matter of rhetoric. U.S. strategists call the civilian casualties caused in Afghanistan "collateral damage" and justify them by appealing to "the doctrine of double effect" as foreseen but unintended consequences of our bombing campaign. At the same time, it is certain that some victims of our bombing campaign wouldn't agree that there is just reason for their suffering. Some justify the destructive force of war, including the unintentional killing of innocents, by appealing to higher purposes. These include Christian love for the innocents who will be defended by war, defense of sovereignty by prevention of injustice in light of a supreme emergency that puts a way of life at risk, or even by way of a coldhearted utilitarian calculus. However, most don't warrant terrorism by the...
doctrine of double effect because it aims directly at killing innocents. Even if we accept the fact that terrorists are at war with us, the terrorists' acts are war crimes, according to standard definitions of justice in war. A 1999 Rand report Countering the New Terrorism concluded, "Terrorist tactics, in most cases, violated the rules that governed armed conflict—for example, the deliberate targeting of noncombatants or actions against hostages."

Terrorists aren't merely pathological; they are political agents who utilize a calculus of terror. They use destructive force in order to antagonize people and destabilize social structure. In this sense political agents who use terrorism aren't pathological at all but are quite rational—they know how to do cost-benefit analysis in order to maximize the results of their activity. The terrorists of September 11, 2001, were quite efficient if we consider that this one act, which involved only a handful of al-Qaeda operatives, resulted in a radical change in U.S. policy.

Terrorists might justify their actions as necessary for the good they intend, or they might redescribe their activities in an effort to appeal to something like the doctrine of double effect. Efforts to appeal to double effect fail because terrorists aim directly at creating civilian casualties as a means; thus with its emphasis on unintentional harm, it doesn't apply. I doubt that the World Trade Center bombers only meant to destroy the buildings and create panic without directly intending to kill innocent human beings. Of course one might justify terrorism by appealing to ideas about political rebellion. For example, John Locke supported revolution against unjust regimes and pointed out that the difficulty is that the only judge who can ultimately decide whether the rebels are justified is God. Individuals must judge for themselves whether such violence is warranted, but human judgment here is in no way infallible.

We still haven't clarified why violence and a fortiori terrorism is bad. One of the most pernicious impacts of violence is the violation of autonomy that comes with it. If someone does something to me that I didn't consent to, not only might there be physical pain but it's an assault on my integrity, my autonomy, and my dignity. This describes the notion of "destructive force." Force moves or somehow affects a thing. Destructive force affects a thing negatively. With regard to force used against human beings, a force is destructive when it affects us in a way we don't permit. This is why killing is thought to be the worst form of violence; we assume that no one would voluntarily approve to be killed. The spiritual harm that results from violation of autonomy is ultimately more important than physical harm. Violence is thus evil, first and foremost, because it violates the autonomy of the victim.

Two important conclusions follow. First, this explains why terrorism and acts of war that kill civilians are usually thought to be unjustified while allowing for the possibility that war itself might be justified. Soldiers, in theory at least, consent to be cannon fodder; civilians don't. Thus destructive force could be justified when used against enemy soldiers while we might still be reluctant to justify the killing of innocent civilians. Second, by focusing on consent, we move beyond a utilitarian justification of terrorism and war. Kai Nielsen, for example, has argued on utilitarian grounds that terrorism might be justifiable, "There are circumstances when such violence must be reluctantly assented to or even taken to be something that one, morally speaking, must do." The example he describes are those "terrorists" or "freedom fighters" who fought for Algerian independence in the 1950s using terror tactics. One assumes that Palestinian suicide bombings and perhaps the World Trade Center bombings could be justified on utilitarian grounds as promoting the general welfare of the Palestinian people or as working toward the freedom of Islam from foreign intervention. A utilitarian such as Nielsen might argue that if these actions serve some further purpose, then they are justifiable. However, the utilitarian calculus again assumes some infallible access to the results of the calculus as if it were possible for mere mortals to weigh up the suffering caused and the happiness created to reach a final verdict about right or wrong. Moreover, the utilitarian isn't concerned with consent. If violence is always a violation of autonomy, and if autonomy is something to which we all have a right by virtue of being human, then violence against innocents will be very difficult to justify on utilitarian grounds. The victims in the World Trade Center and the victims in the streets of Israel didn't and probably wouldn't consent to be used for political ends.

It's hard to imagine how it might be possible to justify actions that cause harm to innocents without their consent even if these actions aren't intended, or if these harms serve some higher purpose. It's safer to adopt a presumption of nonviolence and set a very high burden of proof to justify it such that we would have to be certain that innocents would agree to being harmed in the war effort. It is possible to imagine that victims of totalitarian regimes would consent to a war in the hope that their children could be liberated. Of course the difficulty is that we have to make this judgment, as it were, in an abyss and without access to the thoughts of the intended victims.

The humanist approach I defend here under the rubric of practical pacifism has much in common with other species of pacifism, including that of Albert Camus. During World War II Camus recognized that it was necessary to fight against the Nazi evil. However, after the war Camus argued that, although we must defend freedom, we must also err on the side of peace. We might thus agree that it is necessary to punish terrorists and to protect ourselves from danger; practical pacifism doesn't mean that we cannot ever justify violence. However, the United States' efforts to extend the war on terrorism into Iraq certainly do violate the presumption of nonviolence. U.S. citizens must be careful now as we consider using further violence, and we should modestly recognize our own fallibility and choose to err on the side of peace.

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