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6 Why They Hate Us
A Pedagogical Proposal

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INTRODUCTION

The explanation of human action is both an everyday task and an occasion for the most perplexing of methodological dilemmas. On the one hand, we unreflectively ask for, offer up, and receive action explanations as a matter of daily routine: we need to know *why* someone acts as he does in order to deal with him at all, and do so in everyday contexts without necessarily being stymied into paralysis. On the other hand, when we pause to reflect on the philosophical presuppositions of action explanations, we're quickly led to questions of sufficient complexity to keep philosophers occupied for generations.

Issues in action theory acquire a yet greater degree of complexity when we focus on the explanation of a morally and politically charged category of actions, like 'terrorism' or 'Islamic terrorism' or 'Islamic terrorism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.'[1] The intensification of complexity arises in part from the specifically political and historical dimensions of the topic: what was previously a difficult exercise in action theory becomes, in this context, a yet more difficult interdisciplinary exercise in action theory, legal theory, religious studies, history, and international relations. To explain the actions of an Osama bin Laden or Muhammad Atta, we need the apparatus of action theory, *plus* a conceptual framework for talking about terrorism, *plus* a working knowledge of Islamic theology, *plus* a working knowledge of the history of the modern Near East. And even the metaphor of addition is insufficient to capture what we need; we need to sum what we know and put the results into an integrated and coherent whole.

This topic might at first seem wildly inappropriate as the basis of a pedagogical proposal, as opposed to a professional research program: too complex, too emotionally fraught, and too political. Perhaps counterintuitively—drawing on themes in the work of Gerald Graff[2]—I argue in what follows that teaching it *is* appropriate, and in fact urgently necessary in American higher education. In my experience, American undergraduates want to understand Islamic terrorism, but lack a context in which to study

it. The result is that such students are uniquely vulnerable to the pseudoexplanations of terrorism offered up by ideologues and conspiracy theorists. To preempt that possibility, and simply to educate students to understand the world around them, I argue in what follows that the explanation of terrorism ought explicitly to be thematized and taught. Though challenging and not without risk, I argue that the venture can, under the right circumstances, be successful.

PEDAGOGY AND THE STUDY OF ACTION

Philosophers since Aristotle have typically made a distinction between actions on the one hand and events on the other, and have marked out the former as the subject of a special and systematic topic of study. An action is something *done*; an event is something that merely *happens*. In this sense, though both human and animal action are voluntary and goal-directed, human action is uniquely subject to specifically moral appraisal: not just voluntary but free, and not just goal-directed but intentional. So understood, action is a ubiquitous phenomenon that demands constant and assiduous attention. We can scarcely go a day without in some sense having to deal with, think about, engage in, and/or appraise actions, whether our own or those of others.

In a wide variety of contexts, action confronts us as an interpretive puzzle mediated by 'why' questions. In the simplest case, someone acts a certain way, and we wonder why she's done as she has. Or else we ourselves act without conscious deliberation, and then wonder why we did. These simple cases vary greatly, but variation aside, what we seek in asking such 'why' questions is *intelligibility*. We want to make sense of the action, and the answer to the 'why' question does that by identifying its cause and putting the action in a broader context. Such demands for intelligibility are made in two very different contexts which, risking oversimplification, I'll call the 'everyday' and the 'academic.'

The everyday approach to action involves four interlocking (but typically unarticulated) assumptions that seem, at least prima facie, to cohere in a seamless way. The first concerns the nature of the explanandum; call it 'methodological individualism.' The actions we seek to explain in everyday life are the actions of identifiable individuals; hence 'why' questions are of the form 'Why did *S* do *x*?' where '*S*' denotes such an individual and '*x*' denotes an action.

The second assumption is a presupposition of explanation; call it the 'causal assumption.' Every action is produced by some cause or network of causes, and every 'why' question seeks to identify the causes that produced the action requiring explanation. So the answer to 'Why did *S* do *x*?' is a claim of the form 'Because . . .' where the causal force of that word is to be taken literally.

A third assumption concerns the relevant causes themselves; call it the 'character assumption.' The thought here is that the causes that best explain an action lie in the interaction between *S*'s character and *S*'s circumstances. We identify the deepest and most fundamental causes when we identify the relevant connections between *S*'s traits of character and the circumstances of her action that, in conjunction with those traits, 'triggered' the action.

A final assumption involves the normative status of the causes; call it the 'agency assumption.' While character functions as a cause, its formation is still in some sense up to us, and thereby a candidate for ascriptions of moral responsibility and moral appraisal. It's worth noting that the agency assumption need not involve any commitment, implicit or explicit, to 'compatibilism' as that term is understood in analytic philosophy. Where 'compatibilism' denotes the compatibility of *determinism* and responsibility, the agency assumption merely entails the compatibility of *causation* and responsibility, a commitment compatible with compatibilism (so to speak), but not equivalent to it.

Put in a nutshell, then, the everyday explanatory framework consists in the following ostensible truisms: actions are produced by individuals who freely do what they do in virtue of the interaction between their character and their circumstances; the explanation of an act and the moral evaluation of the causes that produced it are inextricable parts of the same inquiry. An action is produced by the agent's virtues or vices. In the first case, the agent is to be praised and/or rewarded for the action, in the latter, to be blamed and/or punished. But the same cause explains the action as supplies the basis for judging it.

Now consider academic approaches to the study of action. In this case we can, broadly speaking, distinguish two distinct approaches to the subject. On the one hand, we have what might be called the 'first-order disciplines,' i.e., the social sciences, along with those of the natural sciences that focus on the explanation of human action. Here the task is to explain action in particular contexts without worrying too much about second-order issues about the nature of action as such. If we want to explain, say, an action or a trend, we take a certain explanatory framework for granted, and apply it to the relevant data. The basic challenge is to find the best explanatory fit between data and hypothesis, not to raise questions about action as such.

On the other hand, we have what might be called the 'second-order disciplines,' most prominently philosophical action theory. Here the task is to tackle second-order conceptual issues about the nature of action without bothering too much with the job of explaining concrete cases of it. In this case, for instance, we want to know what counts as an action, whether actions can in principle be free, and if so, how freedom relates to determinism, responsibility, and moral judgment. The challenge here is to generate a coherent and plausible conceptual scheme, not to apply it.

Despite the differences between them, both of the preceding academic approaches to explanation exist in tension with what I called the

everyday approach to action—a fact with a series of pedagogically relevant consequences.

Imagine that a student comes to university adhering unreflectively to the everyday explanatory framework I described above, and encounters or majors in one of the first-order disciplines. She soon discovers at least two problematic things.

She discovers, first, that the everyday approach is flatly incompatible with the academic. For one thing, the academic approach flatly denies methodological individualism. It assumes the existence of irreducible social facts and of structural types of causation not reducible to individual action. So individuals no longer take center stage.

Further, the academic approach delegitimizes the importance of character traits in explanation. Reference to such traits is essentially incompatible with the decision-theoretic or evolutionary frameworks now prevalent, and is likewise incompatible with the insistence that genuinely scientific explanations of action involve measurable variables that 'maximize concreteness' and eliminate reference to moral or evaluative predicates.[3]

Finally, the academic approach delegitimizes ascriptions of moral responsibility, at least as a feature of the explanatory enterprise. The agency assumption as I described it above is essentially at odds with the causal models that are taken for granted in the first-order disciplines, where explanations are deterministic, probabilistic, or stochastic but typically ignore the question of how action can, consistent with its etiology, be *up* to the agent (especially in a strong libertarian sense).[4] Thus the single assumption held in common both by the everyday and the academic approach is the causal assumption, but this nominal agreement evaporates in the context of the other, more substantive disagreements. Both approaches agree that explanation is causal but disagree about what that amounts to.

Having made this first discovery, our student quickly makes a second: that her everyday explanatory framework is *irrelevant* to academic study. The governing assumption of a great deal of first-order teaching and inquiry is that the student of a first-order discipline is, qua student, being inculcated into the explanatory framework of the discipline to which she is apprenticed: she is being invited to 'think like' an economist, a political scientist, or a historian. To fail to think in this way, according to standard textbook presentations, is not necessarily to think falsely but to fail to live up to an academically defined role. The choice is either to accept the role and its assumptions, or forswear the respectability that the role confers. The assumptions of the everyday framework are not therefore to be refuted or rejected; they're to be set aside in deference to the imperatives of professionalism.

Suppose now that the student comes to university with the same everyday explanatory framework but goes into philosophical action theory, a second-order discipline. In this case, the student will very likely have to grapple with explicit challenges to every element of her everyday framework. She may well come to vindicate elements of that framework. She could, for instance, become an agent-causal libertarian about free will and/or a nonreductionist virtue ethicist about character. But whether she vindicates or undermines the everyday framework, she will typically study the subject in abstraction from the everyday task of explanation. She might, for instance, come to vindicate metaphysical libertarianism by reflecting on 'Frankfurt counterexamples' or Van Inwagen's 'consequence argument' but have no idea how this bears on the explanation of a single everyday action, much less anything more complicated than that.[5] She might likewise become an enthusiast of virtue ethics by reading Foot or Hursthouse, but as this material is usually taught, it is irrelevant either to second-order questions about the explanation of action or to first-order explanations.[6] And a survey of about twenty logic/critical thinking textbooks convinces me that explanation is one of the least discussed topics in courses on logic and critical thinking. When it *is* discussed (e.g., in the context of inductive logic), textbook examples and exercises on the topic are usually drawn from the natural, not the social sciences, wherein the explananda are events, not actions.

These tensions between the everyday and academic approaches to explanation are exacerbated by tensions within the academic approach. I noted above that the academic study of action divides along first- and second-order lines—and obviously, along lines of division within each of these categories. These various divisions in the academic approach to the subject tend to produce a certain compartmentalization. Each discipline has its own distinctive approach, occasionally overlapping with, but occasionally subversive of, the claims of others. Meanwhile, philosophy tends to pursue its own autonomous lines of inquiry, mostly without reference to the claims of any of the first-order disciplines.

Predictably, this compartmentalization of inquiries gives rise to a dizzying variety of perspectives on the subject of action within the academy, with each perspective saying wildly different things about action and embodying incompatible methodological or substantive approaches to it, but no single discipline devoted to the comparative study or integration of the different claims. Thus a student can learn about free will versus determinism in introductory philosophy, but have no sense of the connection of that topic to her study of 'the causes of World War I' in international relations. She can study 'thick description' in a class on area studies or anthropology,[7] but have no sense of the relation between thick description there and an economist's explanations of the behavior of 'the sovereign consumer' in the local supermarket. Our student can study intention and foresight in the sociology of law without being aware that the very same subjects are discussed in a very different way in moral philosophy. And she can, in criminology, take for granted that crime is produced by 'negative reinforcement,' but never encounter explanations of crime from evolutionary psychology, much less explanations via the id, the ego, or moral agency.[8] As a result of

this compartmentalization, 'action' disappears as an object of study, to be replaced by 'action as seen through the lens of discipline X.'

My point here is not to lament the delegitimization of the everyday approach by the academic, but to suggest that the failure to confront their incompatibility in an explicit way leads students to a sort of epistemic schizophrenia.[9] Given the incompatibilities between the everyday and academic approaches (as well as within the academic), a student has two basic options: either adopt one consistent approach to the explanation of action, or acquiesce in incoherence. The student who opts for acquiescence ends up committed to a sort of methodological relativism, according to which one's choice of an approach to the explanation of action is unregulated by principle; we can adopt any approach to action without worrying about its incompatibilities with other approaches.[10] The student who opts for consistency faces two further options: either consistently affirm the everyday approach to action, or consistently affirm (some brand of) the academic. In the first of these cases, the student is obliged to regard academic inquiry as a relatively pointless exercise unrelated to everyday life. In the second case, bracketing the (unguided) choice of which academic perspective to adopt, she is obliged to apply a radically revisionary explanatory perspective to everyday life without ever explicitly addressing whether the revision might entail a serious loss of intelligibility—or indeed, whether the revisionary perspective is true.

Epistemologists tell us that coherence is (at least) a necessary condition of epistemic justification and so, of knowledge. If so, there is a sense in which academic life, ironically enough, unfits students for knowledge about the explanation of action. What it produces, to paraphrase Bernard Williams, is a situation in which *education destroys knowledge*: the more students believe what they study, the more they undermine the coherence of their beliefs.[11] The easiest strategy for achieving coherence would appear to be to believe as little as possible, but that, unfortunately, is also the quickest recipe for apathy and cynicism.

If this is right, there is an epistemic case to be made for making the study of action a topic (an interdisciplinary course or even a program) designed for advanced undergraduates and graduate students in the humanities and social sciences. If coherence is a necessary condition of knowledge, it requires both the removal of obvious inconsistencies in our belief-sets, as well as the concerted attempt to bring coherence to apparently divergent approaches to a common subject matter. In the present case, it requires students to bring coherence to their beliefs about the explanation of action at multiple levels: between everyday and academic approaches, within different aspects of the everyday approach, and within different aspects of various academic approaches.

Though certainly ambitious, such a project would reap important pedagogical dividends. For one thing, it would ensure that students left the university with the resources to leverage what they had learned about action in the classroom and apply it to 'real life.' It would, in addition, give them a certain capacity for knowledge in their personal lives, while affording them a more critical and intellectually resourceful outlook in law school (or legal practice), graduate school, or work pertaining to business and/or government.

What goes for action generally goes for the study of particular types of it. 'Terrorism' and 'Islamic terrorism' are action-types of particular significance in contemporary life. Could the preceding approach to action improve understanding of those topics?

PEDAGOGY AND THE EXPLANATION OF TERRORISM

Most of us, I suppose, remember where we were on September 11, 2001. I certainly do. I left my apartment that morning around 8:30 and ambled into Princeton University's Firestone Library one minute before American Airlines Flight 11 struck One World Trade Center. Lacking the slightest sense that anything was wrong, I went into the basement of the library so that I could work undisturbed and remained there, undisturbed, until about 1:00 p.m. Around that time, I walked home, intending to eat lunch and drive out to my own institution, The College of New Jersey, to teach my 2:00 p.m. introductory philosophy class. The subject that day was (ironically enough) supposed to have been Ruth Benedict's defense of cultural relativism. I walked in the front door of my apartment and to my bewilderment found my partner home from work hours earlier than usual, watching what I took to be an action film. Except that it wasn't an action film. "You haven't heard," she said, grimly, turning off the television. "Heard what?" I asked.

It took a full five minutes to comprehend what sounded to me to be her bizarre and implausible answer to that question, which I flatly disbelieved at first, and came to believe only after insisting on independent verification of the morning's events on CNN. Unable to think very clearly at that point, and unable to get through to anyone at the college, I robotically insisted on driving there to teach. Having gotten there, I found a memo on the bulletin board from the provost, asking that faculty hold classes rather than cancel them, in order to "facilitate" students' need to "process" the day's events. That, I confess, was the precise moment at which I decided to cancel class: I myself hadn't processed the day's events, and was in no position to facilitate anyone else's attempt to do so.

We all, eventually, did come to process that day's events, and on my campus at least, as well as campuses nearby, many of us made attempts to facilitate our students' attempts to do so. Some of this did real good and some of it didn't, but in one clear respect, I thought then and continue to think that a 'teachable moment' was squandered and eventually lost. The teachable moment concerned the then-ubiquitous, and very urgent, 'why'

question about the original event, which was no sooner posed than forgotten about. The point was put with perfect sensitivity to the zeitgeist by the journalist Christopher Hitchens in a piece in the London *Guardian* called "The Morning After." "One day into the post-World Trade Center era," Hitchens wrote, "and the question 'how' is still taking precedence over the question 'why.'"

> With cellphones still bleeping piteously from under the rubble, it probably seems indecent to most people to ask if the United States has ever done anything to attract such awful hatred. Indeed, the very thought, for the present is taboo. . . .
>
> In general, the motive and character of the perpetrators is shrouded by rhetoric about their "cowardice" and "shadowy" character, almost as if they had not volunteered to immolate themselves in the broadest of broad blue daylight. On the campus where I am writing this, there are a few students and professors willing to venture points about United States foreign policy. But they do so very guardedly, and it would sound like profane apologetics if transmitted live. So the analytical moment, if there is to be one, has been indefinitely postponed.

Noting that "fighter planes are the only craft in the sky over New York and Washington," and that the "National Guard is on the streets," Hitchens ended the piece with the following mordant and prescient observation:

> Yes, it does give the impression that we are "at war," all right. But being on manoeuvres is not the same as warfare, and "preparedness" and "vigilance" are of little value if they contribute to the erection of a Maginot Line in the mind.[12]

We've been at war in the full-blooded sense for nearly eight years now, and though I can inevitably speak only of my own experiences and students (several hundred, at six institutions) I'm inclined to say that the 'analytic moment' remains postponed, and the mental Maginot Lines remain formidably present. For many students (not all, obviously, but a sizable number), the events of 9/11 are now old hat—'history' in the weirdly pejorative sense of that term—and have come to blur into the background of historical events, belonging to the distant and hence irrelevant past. Descriptions of the event itself abet this interpretation. '9/11' is typically seen as a single, one-time, *sui generis* event without context or precedent, unrelated to anything before it, and likewise disconnected from the present and the future. On this conception, it neither bears an intelligible relation to anything we might have done to provoke it, nor for that matter to an entirely self-generated campaign by the terrorists themselves. It was simply a singular bolt from the blue, on par with any natural disaster, appearing as causelessly and inexplicably as its failure to happen again—an event, not an action.

Though it sounds uncharitable to put the point this way, I've also found from hard experience that when asked to discuss 9/11 or terrorism generally, students are capable at best of remembering the events of the day and emoting about them, but can do little of an analytical or cognitive nature with what they remember. Eight years after the fact, they evince a flabbergasting ignorance of key names, places, dates, and chronologies, and a predictable incapacity to make sense even of ordinary newspaper or magazine stories on the subject: one Middle Eastern country is to them the same as every other, as is one Middle Eastern face, leader, grievance, or atrocity. So it is with Islam. Multiculturalism tells them to respect it, folk wisdom tells them to fear it, but few have any idea of what it is, what it says, or what relevance it has to any real-world event.

"And yet," as Hitchens puts the point in a different essay, "there is still an unmet need, an unanswered yearning, for an intelligible past," which "finds its expression in surrogate forms, like the 'referred pain' of a complex ailment. . . ."[13] Unfortunately, one of these "surrogate forms" consists in evading the issues altogether, and then festering in a sort of muted rage or anxiety about the unintelligible evil of 'Muslims' or 'the Bush Administration.' Another closely related form is dogmatic allegiance to propaganda and conspiracy theorizing. I've met as many students who believe that Saddam Hussein was behind 9/11 as believe that the Israelis were. Students in this predicament face two choices: either a wholesale acquiescence in the unintelligibility of the social world they confront, or intelligibility purchased at the price of epistemic virtue.[14]

Some of this, to be sure, arises from perfectly straightforward causes and has relatively straightforward remedies. Obviously, to the extent that students are ignorant of history, politics, or Islam, they need courses in history, politics, and religious studies. To the extent that they're apathetic about the world around them, they need to be motivated to take it seriously. To the extent that they're in the grips of a facile multiculturalism or of bigotry or conspiracy theories, these need to be explicitly challenged and debunked. But while important, these features of the problem tend to conceal deeper problems, problems that persist even after the narrowly informational deficiencies are remedied.

To begin to explain an event like 9/11, at a bare minimum we need an adequate characterization of the explanandum—literally, an account of *what* we're talking about. As many commentators have noted, the very designation '9/11' evades this task: '9/11' is a conveniently neutral set of numbers that presupposes, in Americocentric terms, that the most important phenomenon taking place on the planet that day involved four hijacked jetliners in the airspace of New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington. But even if we make this assumption, we are left with the far-from-trivial question of how to characterize the phenomenon itself.

I take for granted here (contrary to many conspiracy theories) that an attack did take place, and that the conventional account of it is essentially

accurate.[15] If the question, then, is why this attack took place, our focus is ipso facto a moral or political one, involving the motivations and actions of those who launched the attacks, and not a technical or scientific one about the strictly mechanical events of the day—e.g., the physics and chemistry of fuel-laden projectiles, falling towers, melting steel, and crumbling walls, or even how it is that the attackers succeeded in subverting the defense apparatus of the targeted country. Our starting point, then, has to be the attackers themselves.

It is tempting to think that if this is our starting point, the characterization of the relevant actions is entirely obvious: 'nineteen Arab-Muslim hijackers hijacked four American commercial jetliners, ramming two of them into the World Trade Center, one into the Pentagon, and (having been overcome by the passengers) crashing one in a field in southwestern Pennsylvania.' But though every fact in the preceding sentence is true, its truth doesn't by itself entail that the sentence itself is the one incontestably correct description of the event, or of the explanandum. For one thing, it immediately becomes clear that given almost any plausible criterion of relevance, the actions relevant to characterizing 9/11 didn't all take place on September 11, 2001. Many of the relevant actions long preceded that. But how far back should we go? Which actions are relevant?

A bit of reflection on these questions makes clear that even if we insist that the explanandum specifically put al-Qaeda at the center of the action—a highly contestable assumption[16]—we see that 9/11 was not an isolated or random act, but part of a long-standing conflict that began (depending on one's interpretation) in 1917, 1923, 1947, 1967, 1989, 1993, 1996, 1998, or if one really wants to stretch things, 610 A.D.[17] Regardless of one's appraisal of the act, then, 9/11 was part of a broader historical context. We thus face another series of questions preliminary to the task of generating an explanation (or explanatory hypotheses): should we try to explain 9/11 as a single event, or the campaign that gave rise to it? In the first case, why dissociate the one event from its broader context? In the second case, how should we conceptualize the relevant context?

Suppose we decide that our explanandum is not '9/11' as such, but the campaign of which it was (and is) a part. In that case, we soon come to see that the campaign was itself the product of a huge number of individuals, extended in space and time, making choices and forming beliefs, desires, and intentions in response to events around them. Clearly, the choices, beliefs, desires, and intentions are relevant to characterizing the event, but if the mental states make reference to further events, how relevant are these further events? And which events are relevant? This may seem an overly abstract question, but the answer to it makes the difference between describing 9/11 as an 'unprovoked act of mass murder' and describing it as 'proportional retaliation for grievances suffered over the course of a century.'

Suppose we decide, on some principled basis, to identify the relevant actors and delimit the relevant mental states and events. In that case, we face yet another crucial choice. We have, let's say, an account of what al-Qaeda takes itself to be accomplishing in its campaign against its enemies, and thus understand 9/11 in the context of this account. We can at that point either take that account at face value or appraise and judge it from a perspective alien to it, say, our own. In either case, the standards of rationality and morality that we apply (or don't apply) and our manner of applying them will have momentous consequences for the very description of what happened.[18] Again, are we explaining an episode in a nihilistic campaign of terrorist violence, a battle in a holy war, or the expression of nationalist grievances against foreign occupation?

The preceding questions merely scratch the surface of the complexity involved in the task of explanation. What becomes apparent on engaging with them is that there is no obvious way to characterize what happened on 9/11, and so no trivial or self-evident way of specifying the explanandum of any proposed explanation of 'the event.' Virtually every assumption here is contested territory, regardless of the apparent 'obviousness' of any given claim by any given party. The very characterization of the event is a controversial matter and is the product of a complex inquiry, not its self-evident starting point.

Suppose, however, that we get the characterization of the explanandum under control. '9/11,' let us say, is best conceived not as a single event, but as one component in an interconnected series of terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda, its allies, and fellow travelers, each attack being part of a single relatively concerted quasi-military campaign inaugurated by Osama bin Laden's August 1996 "declaration of *jihad*" against the United States.[19] Let's stipulate (ex hypothesi) that we regard this campaign as irrational and evil, thereby rejecting the attackers' claims to be engaged in a (genuinely, as opposed to perceivedly) just war against the United States and its allies. At this point, we run into questions of equal if not greater difficulty and complexity, questions that attend any attempt to explain evil and make it intelligible to those who adamantly reject its claims.

One problem is metaphysical and epistemological. We want to know why the attackers did as they did. In other words, why did they choose evil as against good? On the one hand, the search for answers to these questions entails that we ought to seek causal explanations of the relevant actions. On the other hand, the very nature of the questions suggests that the answers ought to facilitate ascriptions of moral responsibility and predications of moral judgment. But the search for causal explanation presupposes that the relevant acts are part of a network of causes, so that our explanation succeeds only if it picks out the relevant causes. Meanwhile, the tasks of ascribing responsibility and making moral judgment presuppose that the relevant acts are free, and on a common view of things, are *not* produced by any network of causes. The question we face, then, is how to construct a causal explanation while preserving the freedom required to make moral appraisals of the very same actions.[20]

The preceding metaphysical–epistemic problem is complicated by a closely related psychological one.[21] We can in principle take two very different perspectives on an action, which I'll call 'agential' and 'observational.' The agential perspective is the first-personal perspective of the agent performing the act, a perspective we can take up when explaining the acts of others by engaging in a sort of vicarious introspection on their acts.[22] When I introspect vicariously on another's act, I put myself in the position of that agent, to see the world (as much as possible) from within his consciousness, experiencing what it's like to exercise his agency. By contrast, the observational perspective is the second- or third-personal perspective of a spectator on someone else's act. From this perspective, I view the agent as yet another object in the world, subject to causal influence by the world (including factors internal to the agent himself). Both perspectives seem necessary for full understanding of an act, but each perspective stands in psychological tension with the other.

On the one hand, to understand the act, and construct an explanation of it, I have to take the agential perspective on it. But the judgment that an act is evil typically produces revulsion at the act in proportion to its evil, and if the act is sufficiently evil, my revulsion can be so extreme as to vitiate my capacity to take the agential perspective on it in any genuine way. Indeed, it can seem immoral to try, for the more motivationally real I make another's evil, the narrower the gap between thinking about the act and doing it; the narrower that gap, the more it seems that I have to alter my character in the direction of evil to make it motivationally attractive.[23] Unchecked revulsion will incline one to demonize or bestialize those we regard as evil: given our incapacity to take up their perspective, we will tend to assume that their perspective is itself inhuman and, in a fundamental sense, inexplicable.

On the other hand, to explain the act, I also have to take an observational perspective on it. I have to bracket how the agent saw his environment, and focus on the environment itself—those aspects of it that, when cognized, have a propensity to motivate action. In other words, I have to identify the forces acting on the agent, whether internal or external, whether acknowledged by the agent or not. Notice, however, that if I take the observational perspective on the act but refuse the agential, I omit something essential to the act: the agency by which it was produced. I treat the agent as an object acted on by forces beyond his control. This perspective will (despite the protestations of its practitioners) tend to evoke a certain *sympathy* or *pity* (however grudging) for the agent, for from this perspective, the agent is merely pushed or pulled into the action by what is not-him.[24] But if I succumb to this temptation, I subvert my understanding of the very phenomenon I set out to explain—namely, evil.

I list these puzzles not because I regard them as irresolvable paradoxes,[25] but because one cannot begin to explain terrorism, or evil generally, without confronting and resolving them. And though terrorism is of course studied in universities, often with great seriousness and sophistication, I think it is safe to say that one cannot even begin to address the puzzles I've raised by the sources or methods of area studies, postcolonial studies, conventional historiography, social science, or journalism. Students who come to the study of terrorism with nothing but these tools at their disposal are (unless they are miraculously lucky) foredoomed to getting the fundamentals of explanation wrong.[26] One sees the result of this failure in otherwise well-informed students whose attempted explanations of Islamist terrorism oscillate between the claim that terrorists engage in terrorism because the victims deserve it, and the claim that they engage in terrorism from some inexplicable demonic-bestial propensity that inheres in them.

As may be apparent, the conundrums I've discussed here are just special cases of the issues I discussed in the preceding section. They are, in effect, the unresolved tensions between the everyday and academic perspectives, coming home to roost.

THE PROPOSAL AND SOME OBJECTIONS ANSWERED

I lack the space here to describe the specifics of my pedagogical proposal in any detail, so for present purposes, a broad overview of the proposal will have to suffice, followed by a brief discussion of some objections.

What I envision is a course, sequence of courses, or program involving an action-theoretic approach to the study of terrorism, intended for advanced undergraduates in majors pertaining to the study of terrorism. The overall aim of the course would be to integrate what the rest of the curriculum leaves unintegrated about explanation, and to bring an integrated understanding of explanation to bear on the facts. In effect, its subject matter would be the very topics I've been discussing in the preceding sections of this chapter, made intelligible to an undergraduate audience.

For ease of exposition, imagine a single course. The first third of the course would focus on philosophical action theory. Here the governing concern would be to induce the student explicitly to address the conflict between the everyday and academic approaches to action. For example, how (if at all) do we reconcile the social scientist's conception of causal explanation with our everyday approach? Is such a reconciliation possible? If not, which approach is true? A second third of the course would involve the presentation of essential factual content relevant to terrorism: history, politics, and religion. Here, the essential point would be to master the essential factual background concerning (say) Near East history, politics, and fundamentalism required to follow debates about (say) Islamist terrorism. The last third of the course would be devoted to students' appraising existing explanations of terrorism in the literature, and having them produce explanations of their own—applying the lessons learned in the first two parts of the course to the literature, and to the world.

It might be wondered whether the proposal I have in mind is pedagogically feasible. Could students actually study a topic framed in such an abstract, theoretical way?

I think so. I should stress that, as an upper-division course, the proposal I have in mind is intended for a specific subset of students, not the student population as a whole. The material is admittedly demanding and presupposes a background in a relevant area of study as well as an aptitude for interdisciplinary study. But I don't see that the material of the course is any more difficult than, say, calculus, biochemistry, organic chemistry, fluid dynamics, electrical engineering, or philosophy of language, all of which are taught at the undergraduate level. Indeed, for advanced students in philosophy, Near East Studies, or forensic psychology/criminology, some parts of the course may well seem too easy, compensated for by the difficulty of less-familiar parts.

Unlike calculus, biochemistry, and the rest, however, we might think that the study of terrorism involves emotional demands that make it inappropriate as an academic subject at the undergraduate level. Is the proposal, then, too emotionally fraught?

Certainly, the course involves material that would likely produce intense emotional reactions in students, and an instructor would have to know how to deal with the expression of conflict and emotion in the classroom. But the expression of intense emotion is a sign that students have a strong stake in the issues. As long as the expression of emotion doesn't lapse into dogmatism or abuse, I would say that the expression of emotion is a potential ally of inquiry and ought to be capitalized on. A pedagogical skill worth cultivating is the ability to tease out the evaluative judgments expressed through emotion, to lay them out, and to make them amenable to rational analysis. That skill is as necessary in any class on contemporary moral issues, bioethics, or Near East Studies as it would be in the course I'm proposing.[27]

Finally, is there not a danger that a course of the proposed sort lends itself too easily to politicization? Isn't the underlying motivation here the same as that of the "know the enemy" pedagogies we've seen in the past? If so, doesn't the proposal in some sense subordinate the classroom to the national security imperatives of the state?

In one sense, I would admit right from the start that the analysis and proposal I've offered are explicitly and unapologetically political. I assume throughout that Islamist terrorism (and terrorism generally) is something that will occupy center stage in world affairs for the foreseeable future, that it is desirable to have a citizenry capable of dealing with this phenomenon, and that given the pedagogical status quo, we are not apt to get such a citizenry. This is controversial, and in some sense political, but it's neither indoctrinative nor propagandistic.

Having said that, I am emphatically not proposing a "know the enemy" course in the conventional sense of that term, where X is presupposed as "the enemy," and the student's task is to inculcate dogmas about this enemy.[28] Given all that I've said here, a student enrolled in the course I propose could, compatibly with the aims of the course, come to think of terrorism as a justified form of holy war or liberation struggle, sympathize entirely with al-Qaeda, explain 9/11 as an act of condign justice, and reach the conclusion that four million Americans really do deserve to die in retaliation for the malfeasances of American foreign policy.[29] But a student could, compatibly with the aims of the course, come to exactly the reverse views.

The point of the course, as I see it, is not to inculcate any particular view of terrorism, but to get students to come to grips with the relevant challenges of describing, evaluating, and explaining it for themselves. So understood, the purpose of the course rules out indoctrination of any kind—the use of the classroom to impose a specific ideology on students, to penalize them for dissenting from the instructor's views, or to deceive them into regarding the range of permissible debate as narrower than it in fact is.

I make no pretense, however, that the proposal is somehow 'neutral' in the sense that instructors must entirely abstain from the expression of their own considered philosophical or political views in the classroom. Discussion about terrorism is inherently contentious: after all, terrorism itself arises from political strife. Once students are brought up to speed in understanding the foundational issues, they have to learn to deal with the fact that the topic at hand is almost entirely contested territory. The best way of dealing with this fact is to habituate them to dealing in a productive way with conflict itself. To that end, what students need is an instructor who can exemplify the process of constructive disagreement in a way that helps them reliably distinguish that from dogmatism, indoctrination, and evasion.[30] A conflict-laden syllabus, then, is not enough. What is needed is an instructor at home with the conflicts in it.

CONCLUSION

"I have carefully labored," writes Spinoza in the Introduction of his *Political Treatise*, "not to mock, lament or execrate, but to *understand* human actions. . . ."[31] At first glance, this aspiration may seem ill-suited to the study of terrorism. For one thing, it seems to imply that understanding should somehow preclude the execration of evil, and trump the lamentation of its consequences. Worse yet, in common English usage, 'understanding' seems either to imply sympathy for the object of understanding, or to connote the clinical orientation of someone detached or alienated from human action as such. At first glance, then, Spinoza's aspiration seems the very opposite of a desirable pedagogical ideal.

But I think it *is* the ideal. For Spinoza's claim does not imply (as might first appear) that there are no actions worth lamenting or execrating; it demands instead that understanding precede and regulate our emotional

reactions. And though understanding has (for reasons worth investigating) come over time to connote sympathy, detachment, or alienation, what it denotes, in the context of action, is the fullest grasp of the significance of the action—the capacity to identify its causes, to ascribe responsibility for it, to hold it up for moral judgment, to integrate one's account of the act with the rest of one's knowledge, and to put it into the widest and most informative context. Terrorism is perhaps the most-discussed phenomenon of our age. Spinoza's maxim makes the demand that we know *what* we're talking about.

In my view, current pedagogical practices do little to promote that aspiration. My hope is that the proposal I offer here holds out the possibility of the sort of understanding that does promote it, and in doing so, promotes attitudes toward terrorism worth having, and policies worth enacting.[32]

NOTES

1. I focus throughout on Islamic terrorism, but this focus is not necessarily inherent to the proposal as such. Obviously, not all terrorism is Islamic, and the proposal might with appropriate changes be made to apply to the study of other forms of terrorism. Thanks to Magi Ibrahim for pressing this point.
2. See G. Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Higher Education* (New York and London: Norton, 1992), hereafter *BCW*.
3. G. King, R. O. Keohane, and S. Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 6, 109–112.
4. King, Keohane, and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, chap. 3.
5. For a typical textbook presentation of both issues, see R. Kane, ed., *Free Will* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002). For an explicit attempt to decouple the topic of free will from that of explanation, see R. Clarke, "Toward a Credible Agent-Causal Account of Free Will," in *Agents, Causes, and Events: Essays on Indeterminism and Free Will*, ed. T. O'Connor (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 210–11.

   On Frankfurt counterexamples, see H. G. Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *Journal of Philosophy* LXVI, no. 23 (1969), reprinted in *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), chap. 1. On the consequence argument, see P. Van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983).
6. See P. Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001); R. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). One notable exception to this rule is the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. See chaps. 7 and 8 of his *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). In my experience, however, instructors usually omit MacIntyre's views on explanation from courses on virtue ethics. The professor in my Twentieth Century Ethics seminar in graduate school assigned us almost all of *After Virtue* to read, but told us to "skip the chapters on social science," since "they've got nothing to do with ethics." My undergraduate professors in political philosophy (at a different institution) said and did about the same thing.
7. C. Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30.
8. Cf. Graff, *BCW*, chaps. 6–7.
9. Cf. Graff, *BCW*, chap. 6.
10. I don't think that the problem can be circumvented by differentiating contexts of explanation and employing some methods in some contexts, and others in others. For one thing, we would need a principled account of how to individuate and differentiate contexts, and need an account of why each context required methods that were (not just different but) *incompatible* with those in other contexts. It's not clear that that's possible. Second, notice that the everyday question asks 'Why did *S* do *x*?' In this form, the question makes no reference to context; it simply demands the explanation of an action as such. Thus if the presuppositions of the question are correct, the question cannot affirmatively be answered by an explanation relativized to a context: to give such an answer is to fail to answer the question as asked. But if the only possible explanations are relativized to contexts, the presuppositions of the question as asked must simply be illegitimate, since the question asks for the impossible. I think the alternatives are exhaustive, and their exhaustiveness sharpens the dilemma described in the text. Thanks to Yvonne Raley for pressing this issue.
11. B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 147, 168–70. We could, in principle, ignore the tensions I've described in the text, proceeding as though they weren't there or weren't important, but this gambit would necessarily have to come at the expense of coherence, and if coherence is necessary for knowledge, at the expense of knowledge. Thanks to Yvonne Raley for pressing this point.
12. C. Hitchens, "The Morning After," reprinted in *Love, Poverty, and War: Journeys and Essays* (New York: Nation Books, 2004), 407, 408, 409.
13. C. Hitchens, "Why Americans Are Not Taught History," in *Love, Poverty, and War*, 265.
14. For an illuminating discussion of 9/11 conspiracy theorizing, see S. J. Al Azm, "Islam, Terrorism, and the West," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25, no. 1 (2005): 6–15.
15. In what follows, I accept the essential veracity of *The 9/11 Commission Report*, authorized ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004).
16. Contestable because Khalid Shaikh Muhammad, "the principal architect of the 9/11 attacks," was not a member of al-Qaeda but "enjoyed considerable autonomy" in planning his own independent terrorist campaigns. See *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 145, and generally, pp. 145–50. The word *qaeda* in Arabic means 'base' or 'foundation' and therefore implies the existence of a superstructure supported by the base but not identical with it.
17. An explanation for the significance of the dates in the text: 1917 represents the date of the Balfour Declaration; 1923, the end of the Ottoman Caliphate; 1947, the proposed partition of Palestine; 1967, the (to Arabs) most traumatic of the Arab–Israeli wars; 1989, the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan; 1993, the first attack on the World Trade Center; 1996 and 1998, the dates of Osama bin Laden's first and second *fatwas* against the US, respectively; and 610 A.D., the Prophet Muhammad's assumption of the prophecy.
18. Cf. A. MacIntyre, "Rationality and the Explanation of Action," in *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), chap. 21.

19. Reprinted as chapter 3 of *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, ed. B. Lawrence, tr. J. Howarth (London and New York: Verso, 2005).
20. For two contrasting accounts of this issue, see T. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), chap. 7 (hereafter *VFN*), and T. O'Connor, "Agent Causation," in *Agents, Causes, and Events*, 173–200.
21. My account here, though highly influenced by Nagel's philosophy of mind, departs radically from it in ways that I cannot discuss here. See Nagel *VFN*, 120–24; "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *Philosophical Review* 33, October 1974, reprinted in T. Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 165–80.
22. I get the phrase "vicarious introspection" from J. Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), xvii. Cf. Nagel: when we hold someone responsible for an action, "the result is not merely a description of his character, but a vicarious occupation of his point of view and evaluation of his actions from within it" (*VFN*, 121).
23. For a brilliant fictional depiction of this problem, see I. Murdoch, *The Nice and the Good* (New York: Penguin, 1968). Cf. E. H. Carr's discussion of a similar point in *What Is History?* (New York: Vintage, 1961), 26–29.
24. Stern offers a sensitive account of this problem; see the Introduction of *Terror in the Name of God*.
25. *Pace* Nagel, *VFN*, 113, 117, 123, 124, 137.
26. I include in this assessment social scientists who adopt the explanatory framework of R. A. Pape's *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005), widely regarded as a model of explanatory success in the social sciences. Yet Pape deals with none of the topics I discuss in this paper, and offers an explanation of suicide terrorism that equivocally ascribes it to "foreign occupation" and to *perceptions of* foreign occupation (e.g., 20–24). Thus his account treats veridical cognition of real occupations and delusions about nonexistent ones as a single unitary causal factor in the production of suicide terrorism. But it is hardly clear that incompatible phenomena can, by mere conjunction, be regarded as unitary causal factors. It is also highly disputable that explanations of action that abstain from judgments of rationality about the explananda, as Pape's does, are genuinely explanatory of those actions. An action is arguably not intelligible until we can judge its rationality, but we cannot judge this from a perspective that is professedly neutral as between veridical cognition and self-delusion. (On this latter point, see MacIntyre, "Rationality and the Explanation of Action," cited note 18 above.) If either of these points can be vindicated, Pape's explanation becomes a paradigm of explanatory failure, not success.

    For a critique of the methodological assumptions of postcolonial theory, see my "Essentialism, Consistency, and Islam: A Critique of Edward Said's *Orientalism*," *Israel Affairs* 13, no. 4 (2007): 689–713.
27. Cf. Graff, *BCW*, 148.
28. Cf. Graff's discussion of this issue in *BCW*, 153–155. See also my review of William Bennett's *Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism* in *Teaching Philosophy* 27, no. 1 (2004): 61–65.
29. Bin Laden's spokesman, Suleman Abu Gheith, has argued that four million Americans deserve to die in retaliation for what he takes to be indiscriminate killing of Muslims by the United States. See "Why We Fight America," Middle East Research Institute, Special Dispatch Series No. 388 (12 June 2002), http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?ID=SP38802.

It's worth remembering that if a course of this sort were taught in a Muslim-majority country, most students would have as much sympathy for al-Qaeda as American students have for the American military. As I say in what follows in the text and imply in the discussion of "narrowly informational deficiencies," I do not mean to imply that an instructor should remain neutral about a student's sympathy for al-Qaeda. The view needs to be challenged. But it is not the *purpose* of the class to ensure that students have or lack such sympathy. Thanks to Yvonne Raley for pressing this issue.

30. For an excellent discussion of philosophy instructor as discursive model for students, see C.-A. Biondi, "Socratic Teaching: Beyond *The Paper Chase*," *Teaching Philosophy* 31, no. 2 (2008): 119–140.
31. B. de Spinoza, *A Political Treatise*, tr. R. H. M Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951), I.4, 288 (my emphasis).
32. Thanks to George Abaunza, Fahmi Abboushi, Sadik al Azm, Carrie-Ann Biondi, Richard Burnor, Hilary Persky, and Yvonne Raley for helpful conversations on the subject of this essay, and to Carrie-Ann Biondi and Yvonne Raley for comments on the essay itself. Thanks also to audiences at The College of New Jersey and Felician College for the opportunity to present related material.

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