Terrorism and the good life: toward a virtue-ethical framework for morally assessing terrorism and counter-terrorism

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

This paper shows that contemporary political reasoning and action in the context of modern terrorism derives from moral arguments that are seriously flawed. Those arguments are built on a simplistic understanding of terrorism and exclusively adhere to ‘conventional’ act-based ethical, for example, deontological or utilitarian, frameworks for morally assessing the political reality of terrorism and counter-terrorism. As a result, political reasoning and counter-terrorism action fail to take into account certain indispensable morally relevant features of terrorism. It will be argued in this paper that contemporary approaches are therefore unable to grasp the (moral) complexity of the terrorist phenomenon what ultimately leads to political paralysis in the domain of counter-terrorism action. In order to be able to include a more extended notion of morally relevant features of terrorism in an understanding of terrorism and consequently in its moral assessment, this paper develops an alternative ethical framework based on virtue ethics and on a eudemonistic concept of the good life. In a last step, this paper shows how such a comprehensive and integrative, virtue-ethical, framework overcomes the limitations of current dominant approaches and so contributes to promoting morally legitimate, sustainable and effective counter-terrorism action.

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\textbf{Introduction}

Political actions always reveal certain presumptions about what is right and what is wrong. Although it is a widespread belief that modern politics is and should be neutral to morality, it is difficult to deny that moral judgments inevitably play a role in political action and reasoning. For example, the reason why many people believe that it is right to fight against terrorism with military and coercive means, is that they believe that terrorism is unquestionably morally reprehensible. There are many different reasons why people believe that terrorism is wrong, for example, because of the indiscriminate use of violence, its disproportional character, the instrumentalization of fear, etc. Often though, those beliefs are not made explicit because they are perceived as common sense. Especially

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in the context of transnational terrorism and counter-terrorism, many presumptions about the (moral) nature of terrorism guide political actions and political reasoning without being called into question. Aim of the first part of this paper is to show that particular definitions of terrorism and certain ontological assumptions about terrorism result in particular moral judgments. It is important to disclose those ideas and assumptions in order to gain a better understanding of how they play into political reasoning and how they inform counter-terrorism action. In the second part of this paper it will then be showed how those prevalent approaches and moral judgments are very limited in the context of modern terrorism since they fail to take into account other morally relevant features of terrorism. In a last part of this paper it will therefore be shown how a different, virtue-ethical framework might overcome the pitfalls of current approaches and how this might lead to more sustainable and morally legitimate forms of counter-terrorism.

**Terrorism as a subject of ethical reflection: problems and pitfalls**

Before being able to discuss moral issues of terrorism and counter-terrorism, it is important to pay some attention to the subject of ethical reflection and to point at the first difficulties that arise when engaging with the study of terrorism. Although it is often assumed that terrorism is a clear-cut phenomenon with clear-cut identifiable characteristics, in fact there is far from consensus on the nature of terrorism. Many structural problems obstruct the process of finding a general definition of terrorism, despite many efforts on both a legal and an academic level. Furthermore, the understanding of terrorism is to a high extent influenced by a priori beliefs about (political) reality.

**The definition problem**

The 11th of September 2001 marks a determining caesura in the long history of terrorism and can be perceived as decisive for changing the general understanding and conception of terrorism on both a public and political level. Ever since the so-called Global War on Terrorism was declared, it seems to be a widespread belief that something like the terrorism or the terrorist exists. Although research on terrorism has increased immensely in the post-9/11 era, the definitional problem as well as the implications thereof seems not to get the attention they actually should get. In general, there is a lacking awareness of the fact that there is neither an (academic) consensus definition of terrorism nor a legal consensus definition of terrorism. For this paper’s argument, a short introduction into the definition problem of terrorism is indispensable. Therefore, three important issues that complicate the process of defining terrorism will be discussed now.

Because of the increasing occurrence of terrorist violence in the last 15 years and the ways in which this changed public opinion through media and political debate, terrorism seems to have become a buzzword. Buzzwords are words or concepts that are used constantly in the media, in academic context, in political discourse, etc. Because of their frequent use, buzzwords increasingly lose their semantic content and slowly become meaningless or turn into fit-for-all categories. Buzzwords tend to describe a high variety of phenomena but depict them as a single phenomenon. This is what happened with the general understanding of terrorism in the last decades. Though the word terrorism is more than regularly used, what exactly is meant with the usage is very seldom an
issue of interest. The steadily decreasing semantic content of the words ‘terrorism’, ‘terror’ and ‘terrorist’, clearly obscures a comprehensive and genuine understanding of the terrorist phenomenon and thus impedes the quest for a terrorism definition.

Besides the problem of a lack of semantic clarity, there is a second important problem obstructing the process of finding a terrorism definition. The categories ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorists’ seems to be used in different contexts, often in a pejorative sense, and often as a method of delegitimizing the other. Especially after 9/11, it has become common to describe the enemy no longer as ‘the enemy’ or opponent but as a ‘terrorist’. The category ‘terrorists’ thus is one, almost exclusively, used as a category of ascription instead of self-definition. Those, I don’t accept or perceive as a threat, I call terrorists. The labeling of a person as a terrorist is dependent on one’s own point of view and is therefore highly inconsistent. The meaning of the categories ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorists’ might furthermore change over time, depending on which actors are perceived as constituting an important threat to a state. The time- and context-dependent character of terrorism has been described comprehensively by Martha Crenshaw in her well-known book Terrorism in context (1995). Crenshaw already pointed at this important feature of terrorism in 1995, saying that

both the phenomenon of terrorism and our conceptions of it depend on historical context – political, social, and economic – and on how the groups and individuals who participate in or respond to the actions we call terrorism relate to the world in which they act. (1995, p. 3)

The inconsistent use and ascription of the categories ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorist’ in the post-9/11 era poses another challenge to the process of defining terrorism.

A third important problem that makes it difficult to define terrorism is the fact that there are many forms of terrorism. Terrorism, as a political strategy, is an age-old phenomenon. In general, terrorism is a political instrument used by many different groups throughout history and throughout the whole political spectrum. As a violent strategy, terrorism has thus been adopted by various actors with various religious, ideological, political, etc. motivations. It is problematic to assume that all different forms of terrorism are just a variation of the same phenomenon. A definition that neglects the variety of forms of terrorism is prone to being too general to be significant.

It must be clear by now, that the use of the categories ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorist’ is highly ambiguous and not very informative because of the three problems discussed here. Those three problems are just some examples and the list of issues obstructing the definition of terrorism is much longer (cf. Schmid, 2011, pp. 43–44). A further discussion of those issues does not fall within the scope of this paper but this first introduction into the definitional problem of terrorism should have shown that there are many different issues rendering it impossible to treat terrorism as a single concept. This finding has important implications for the moral assessment of terrorism and counter-terrorism as will be shown later on.

Ontological assumptions
The discussion of the definition problem above is relevant for the main argument of this paper because, as will be shown in the next part of this paper, particular definitions or understandings of terrorism result in particular moral judgments of terrorism. However, definitions alone do not explain all moral evaluation since many definitions appear to be morally neutral. In the previous section, it was argued that the definition of terrorism is highly context- and time-dependent. This not only contributes to the definitional
problem, but also points at an important nexus of ontological assumptions and moral evaluation of (political) reality. The way in which terrorism is perceived is not only dependent on its functional or structural features, such as the use of indiscriminate or disproportional violence. The moral assessment of those features might instead change over time, and there might be situations in which those features are perceived as more morally reprehensible than in other situations. When we define ontology as the whole of ideas we have about the nature of things, reality and existence, it is not difficult to understand how ontology continuously influences moral judgments about (political) reality. Ontological assumptions are those judgments deriving from a particular ontology that are not further questioned, in other words taken-for-granted evaluations of reality. In the context of modern terrorism and counter-terrorism, this is an important point because it reveals that the moral assessment of terrorism is not only the result of structural facts, but is also dependent on other beliefs about the world we live in, about relations, causation, etc. In the next part of this chapter it will be shown why it is important to be aware of this interplay and how it influences the perception of moral legitimacy and illegitimacy in the context of terrorism and counter-terrorism.

**Ethics of terrorism and counter-terrorism**

This paper started off by saying that political action always reveals something about what is perceived as right and wrong, as morally legitimate and morally illegitimate action. Especially in the context of terrorism and counter-terrorism this becomes increasingly apparent. Moral arguments play an important role in legitimizing certain forms of counter-terrorism action and delegitimizing terrorist violence. It is therefore important to reflect more on the way in which ethics informs political reasoning and action, in general and especially regarding the challenge of modern terrorism. According to Virginia Held ‘the occurrence of terrorism illustrates the inescapability of ethics in world politics’ (Held, 2010, p. 342). Although the research on ethics of terrorism and counter-terrorism has gained a lot of attention in the last couple of years, the domain of ethics of terrorism remains a seldom issue of interest. The only way to obtain a comprehensive understanding of prevalent moral arguments in the domain of terrorism and counter-terrorism is through a serious engagement with an ‘ethics of terrorism’. This is furthermore important because the moral judgments on terrorism are the precondition for particular moral assessment of counter-terrorism. An ethics of counter-terrorism can therefore not be fully understood without reflecting on the ethics of terrorism. In this section, prevalent moral arguments and ethical frameworks that are applied in the context of terrorism and counter-terrorism will be discussed in order to show their interconnection and to point at the necessity of seriously engaging with terrorism’s ethics.

The main question of terrorism ethics is: why is terrorism morally wrong? And: is terrorism ever morally legitimate? Ethics of terrorism is concerned with this question and with defining what elements or characteristics of terrorism contribute to its morally objectionable or morally acceptable status. In the first part of this paper it was shown that it is nearly impossible to conceive of terrorism as a single concept and that there are different ways of defining and understanding terrorism. This has important consequences for terrorism’s moral assessment, since not every characteristic or understanding of terrorism has the same effect on its moral assessment. In other words, it must be considered that certain
assumptions about the nature of terrorism might result in a more positive moral assessment of terrorism. Although intuitively, it might be difficult to consider terrorism to be in any form morally legitimate, it is important to consider this theoretical possibility instead of a priori discarding it. The intuition that terrorism is a priori wrong is the result of a priori assumptions about the nature and causality of terrorism, and not necessarily inherent to the phenomenon itself. Those assumptions will need to be disclosed and set aside in order to be able to seriously engage with ethical questions of terrorism and counter-terrorism.

Within the realm of terrorism ethics, one can generally distinguish between two approaches: those approaches focusing on the effects of terrorism, on its means and targets and secondly, those approaches that take into account the broader ‘causation’ processes of terrorism. Although it is important to note that latter approaches are not often part of contemporary political reasoning but rather limited to academic research. The first approach mainly relates to a structural-functional understanding and definition of terrorism, whereas the second approach is based on a more ‘genealogical’ understanding. Arguments for the moral legitimacy of terrorism are mainly based on the assumption that there might be determinable legitimate reasons for the resort to terrorism. Examples of such an approach would be

1. Root cause theory, arguing that certain socio-economic conditions legitimizes the resort to terrorism;
2. Liberation theory, pointing out that severe political oppression might legitimately be counteracted with terrorist means;
3. Consequentialist arguments such as the argument that terrorism might in some cases be more preferable than starting an entire war (cf. Held, 2008).

Arguments for the moral impermissibility of terrorism, because of their structural-functional understanding of terrorism, assume that terrorist acts are per se morally condemnable and that motivation or causation is irrelevant for the moral evaluation of terrorism. This approach morally assesses terrorism on the basis of for example:

1. Just war theory, pointing out the terrorism is wrong because it should be equally evaluated as war and the preconditions for the ‘justness’ of this ‘war-like’ violence are not satisfied;
2. Human rights, since terrorist violence causes the violation of human rights or;
3. Consequentialist arguments, showing that the goal of terrorism can never outweigh its consequences;

An ethics of counter-terrorism is mainly concerned with the question what measures are morally legitimized and what measures are morally reprehensible in counter-terrorism action. It should be evident that the answer to this question is dependent on the moral assessment of terrorism. In the aftermath of 9/11 counter-terrorism has increasingly become militarized, thereby using methods that are morally questionable itself, something which is arguably due to the absolute moral condemnation of terrorist violence. It is obvious that one would react different to terrorism if one assumes that terrorism is absolutely morally reprehensible than if one assumes that there are situations in which
the resort to terrorism might be legitimized. In the context of counter-terrorism ethics, there are also two lines of argumentation. The arguments legitimizing militarized counter-terrorism are built on:

1. Just war theory, arguing that in the case of a terrorist attack the principles of just war theory might be satisfied and thus allow the resort to military measures;
2. International humanitarian law principles such as the principle of self-defense or supreme emergency exception by claiming that those principles apply in case of a terrorist attack;
3. Utilitarian ethical principles such as the principle of the lesser evil, pointing at the fact that military counter-terrorism is morally legitimate because it constitutes a lesser evil in comparison to the evil of terrorism itself.

Militarized counter-terrorism is mainly delegitimized by:

1. Human rights principles, showing that militarized counter-terrorism violates human rights in the same way as terrorism violates human rights and can thus never be morally legitimate;
2. Just war theory, pointing out that either the principles of just war theory are not satisfied in the case of a terrorist attack or by arguing that the theory is not applicable to terrorism in general;
3. International humanitarian law principles, claiming that the applicability of humanitarian principles to terrorist violence is not approved and too ambiguous to be authoritative in this context.

The following overview shows that the moral assessment of terrorism and counter-terrorism is often based on similar lines of argumentation (just war theory, human rights, IHL, … ) that are and can be used to both (de)legitimize terrorism and violent counter-terrorism. This finding reveals the ambiguity of current ways of morally assessing terrorism and counter-terrorism. A further conclusion is that it is very difficult to outline valid principles for the ethical evaluation of terrorism and counter-terrorism in general, due to the fact that the moral assessment might ultimately depend on what is believed to be the morally distinctive characteristics of terrorism, on ontological assumptions that go beyond particular definitions and as have been shown, there is far from consensus on this subject. Further elaborating on the ethics of terrorism as distinct field of study might therefore be essential for a better understanding of this interplay, to eventually be able to develop a more comprehensive and integrative ethical framework for the moral assessment of both terrorism and counter-terrorism. This will be necessary because, as will be shown in the next part, the above mentioned ethical frameworks appear to have very little explanatory power regarding the moral complexity of terrorism.

**Limits of act-oriented moral evaluation of terrorism**

The last section listed up several important and most prevalent moral arguments in the context of terrorism and counter-terrorism, showed that they are dependent on different definitions or understandings of terrorism and pointed at the correlation between moral
assessment of terrorism and counter-terrorism. It was furthermore argued that current understanding of terrorism and consequently its moral assessment is highly ambiguous. Since 9/11, most of political reasoning on terrorism and counter-terrorism is based on the idea that terrorism is absolutely morally reprehensible. The main reason therefore is that political reasoning is exclusively act-oriented, adopts an exclusively structural-functional understanding of terrorism and subsequently morally assesses terrorism through single principles such as human rights principles, IHL argumentations or the just war theory paradigm. Those act-oriented frameworks naturally result in a negative assessment of terrorism and a positive assessment of coercive counter-terrorism.

An exclusively act-oriented approach towards moral problems, denying the role of actor and causes, is symptomatic for ethical considerations in politics as well as for modern moral theory in general. Modern moral theory is mostly based on either deontological or utilitarian considerations. Those approaches assume that a single principle, either a rule or an ethical principle, can answer complex moral questions. However, counter-terrorism action that derives from a moral assessment of terrorism that bases on similar ethical frameworks is neither able to be morally legitimate itself nor to sustainably contain terrorism. It seems as if the moral questions accompanying the challenge of modern terrorism are too complex to be approached with single-principle-based ethical frameworks. Those frameworks reveal obvious limitations for morally assessing terrorism and counter-terrorism.

Act-oriented, principle-based ethical frameworks fail to take into account the extended realm of morally relevant features of terrorism. They neglect the role of both the actor performing the act and the conditions contributing to the generation of the act. In other words, they only take into account material and formal causation; what terrorist violence is and how it appears. Although within the domain of ethics of terrorism and counter-terrorism there are several approaches that do suggest the importance of those factors, they are not perceived as relevant for counter-terrorism action. Instead, current conceptions of counter-terrorism are based on act-oriented moral assessment of terrorism and thus only focus on the concrete repercussions of terrorist violence, its appearance, its methods, etc. This paper however argues that the range of features of terrorism that are relevant for its moral evaluation reaches far beyond its structural or formal features. There are many other elements that are ‘constitutive’ of terrorism. Besides structural-functional aspects of terrorism, other aspects such as generation processes and actor motivations are also important for better understanding terrorism's dynamics. Those conditions are important for a comprehensive understanding of terrorism and should be incorporated in its moral assessment. It is true that, ‘in any event, we can hardly deny that many, if not all, of these conditions should figure in an account of terrorism’ (Peterson, 2007, p. 91).

It is argued here that there are three important aspects of terrorism that need to be taken into account by a proper account of terrorism as a precondition for a genuine moral assessment of terrorism. In the first part of this paper, it was argued that one cannot treat terrorism as a single phenomenon and it was argued that ethical frameworks that try to assess terrorism as a single phenomenon reveal important limitations. If an ethical framework aims to successfully deal with the (moral) complexity of terrorism and to respect the singularity of terrorism cases, it should incorporate an understanding of terrorism that distinguishes between the appearance, the exogeny and the endogeny of terrorism. Appearance refers to the way in which terrorism visibly occurs and functions
as a political strategy. Exogeny and endogeny originally refer to biological processes. Exogeny describes materials present in an organism or a cell that however originate from outside, whereas endogeny describes substances and processes that originate from within the organism or the cell itself. Generally speaking, exogeny describes those processes that are initiated or fostered by an outside impact and endogeny describes those processes that are driven by inner dynamics. The three constituents consist of the following elements:

(1) Appearance: methods, means, targets, actors, strategic elements, etc.
(2) Exogeny: relations, environment (socio-economic, …), (political) culture, religion, etc.
(3) Endogeny: idea(1)s, beliefs, norms, values, ethics, etc.

As have been shown, contemporary act-oriented moral evaluation of both terrorism and counter-terrorism, based on a structural-functional understanding of terrorism and other unexplained assumptions, are unable of delivering an account of the three constituents, or in other words of terrorism's (moral) complexity. Even those approaches that point at the importance of causation or agent-oriented evaluation are limited in this respect since they on their part often fail to deliver an account for morally assessing the act itself. In other words, a too one-sided approach is generally unable to understand the moral problem of terrorism and consequently counter-terrorism.

In order to be able to take into account the three constituents summed up above, we might need to look for an alternative ethical framework that is able to integrate all three aspects in its moral assessment of terrorism and counter-terrorism. Following from the critique towards one-sided approaches, it suggests itself to work with an ethical framework that is no longer exclusively act-, actor- or cause-oriented but enables the integration of agent-oriented elements, action guidance and complex causation.

A virtue-ethical framework as integrative framework

The last section showed that there are three important things an alternative, more integrative ethical framework for the moral assessment of terrorism and counter-terrorism must be able to account for. The only comprehensive alternative to prevalent act-oriented and single-principle-based ethical frameworks is virtue ethics. Although virtue ethics has a bad reputation, since the mid-1990s there is an increasing interest in its applicability to modern moral problems, also in the domain of politics. The reasons therefore might be that virtue ethics deliver a radical different starting point for moral reflection that might shed a new light on moral deadlocks in contemporary political philosophy. In earlier ages, the fundamental question of moral reflection was not 'what ought I to do?' but rather 'how should I live my life'. Ethics, at this point in history, was mainly based on the reflection of one's personal 'life as a whole and the way in which her values and projects do (or do not) fit together into an overall structure which gives her life coherence and direction' (Annas, 1992, p. 134). According to this theory, a person's life has a final goal and is oriented towards a final good, eudemonia or happiness.

Virtue ethics originates in the fourth-century BC with Aristotle as its intellectual father. The world of the fourth-century BC is very different from our modern world and many concepts in which virtue-ethical theory is embedded might have virtually no commonalities
with modern concepts. Cosmology, anthropology, understanding of the role of the state and political community were determined by naturalism and teleology. The virtue-ethical framework is essentially based on the presumption that everything, including human life itself, is directed towards a certain ultimate goal. Teleological thinking and classic ontology is often perceived as outdated and inapplicable to modern reality, especially in regard to anthropological and moral questions. This is also one of the main reasons why many people are not very keen of reviving virtue ethics. When trying to revitalize virtue ethics, one is indeed confronted with a difficult space-time barrier. Nevertheless, although virtue ethics’ underlying metaphysics and ontology might appear dusty, it has manifold aspects that are interesting for modern moral and political philosophy. For example, it was pointed at the necessity of reflecting more on the role of moral argumentation and ethics in politics and to unravel ontological assumptions that play into political reasoning. The fact that the interplay of ethics and politics is very obscure today is mainly due to the strict distinction that is made between ethics and politics. The first and most obvious benefit of virtue ethics is the fact that, from a virtue-ethical perspective, politics and ethics cannot be separated as will be further discussed in the following paragraphs.

This paper argues that the benefits of a virtue-ethical framework are far-reaching, especially in the context of terrorism and counter-terrorism. Since it was argued that the most important limitation of contemporary ethical frameworks for morally assessing terrorism and counter-terrorism is their inability to take into account the moral complexity of terrorism. If a virtue-ethical framework aims to offer a serious alternative, it should be able to account for the three constituents of terrorism in the following fashion:

| Constituent  | Virtue-ethical framework – task |
|--------------|---------------------------------|
| Appearance   | Action guidance. (De)legitimizing action in a principled fashion. |
| Exogeny      | ‘Sensitivity for moral relevant features of our circumstances’, understanding how moral agency is interrelated with living condition and (political) culture |
| Endogeny     | Giving an actor’s moral attitude, values, idea(l)s, etc. moral relevance |

There are five main aspects of virtue ethics that support the assumption that virtue ethics offers a suitable alternative ethical framework for the moral assessment of terrorism and counter-terrorism and thus satisfies the requirements listed up above, namely:

1. Virtue ethics assume that human beings are naturally oriented toward striving for their final end: eudemonia (happiness and good life);
2. Virtue ethics promotes an understanding of morally complex questions from a dominantly agent-centered perspective by making the reflection on one’s personal life the starting point of moral reflection and can nevertheless provide action guidance;
3. Virtue ethics assumes an overlapping of the political sphere with the public and personal sphere: the human being always is a *zoon politikon*, a political human being. Political life is the precondition for a happy life and thus for enabling the individual to attain its final end;
4. Virtue ethics is embedded in an understanding of causality that is not exclusively material, but includes accounts of ends, actors and arrangements;
5. Furthermore, virtue ethics assumes an a priori embeddedness of the individual in the collective. Human individual life is naturally directed towards happiness which
naturally implies not only self-concern but also some demands of other-concern. Living well is inherently connected to living together (cf. Garver, 2011).

All five aspects cannot be discussed in extenso here. Though by means of giving an example of the concrete implication of adopting a virtue-ethical framework for the moral assessment of terrorism and counter-terrorism, the last parts of this paper will discuss how a eudemonistic concept of the good life, which is the cornerstone of virtue ethics, might contribute to reframing moral questions of terrorism and counter-terrorism and overcoming the limits of current act-centered or otherwise one-sided ethical frameworks.

Terrorism and the good life

According to virtue ethics, all humans have interest in human flourishing as a final good since flourishing, respectively happiness is a human's final end, telos. For Aristotle, human flourishing means living a life in virtues, being able to develop the virtues and living an intellectual life according to the human's essence of being a rational animal. Happiness or good life in this sense is not something which is bestowed upon us but something that requires active involvement with goods in order for it to contribute the final good of human flourishing. Whether or not we agree with the fact that Aristotle's conception of the good life would be the best life for every human being, the basic idea that actions of human beings are influenced and directed by the reflection on their life as a whole and by the degree to which their life correspond to their conception of the good life, eudemonia or happiness, might contribute to better understanding why people resort to terrorism and come to believe that terrorism is a legitimate means for a certain end.

This paper argues that the virtue-ethical concept of the good life, eudemonia, might help to reframe the unresolved questions of terrorism’s (moral) nature through respecting the singularity of terrorism cases and through integrating notions of act, actor and complex causation in the moral assessment of terrorism and counter-terrorism. From a virtue-ethical perspective, terrorism is both symptomatic of a lacking opportunity of people to live a good life and a threat to the good life itself. The ‘bad life’ of terrorism is in other words antagonistic to the good life, to the human telos. If the ‘infrastructure’ is not existent for people to flourish, humans are not able to develop the virtues and are thus unable to live a good life.

It is unrealistic, Aristotle proclaims, to live a good life in the midst of chaos and distress. If we have to live in constant fear and struggle for necessities, we are not going to be able to live a good life. Fear is disruptive, terror is even more so. (Lännström, 2006, p. 42)

Although people are principally inclined to living a good life, to realize their final end, they can only do this under certain circumstances. For Aristoteles, opting for the good life is not something everyone is capable of, but ultimately dependent on whether or not the necessary conditions are provided.

From this perspective, the bad life of terrorism is thus a result of the lacking ability to opt for the good life. If human beings are not able to live a life in virtue, they are likely to perform immoral (vicious) actions that harm the good life of others. If the good life of
others is seriously harmed by the fact that people resort to vicious action because of the lacking ‘infrastructure’ enabling them to live a good life, the requirements for the good life of others are disrupted and will disable others to live a life in virtue. In other words, something like a vicious circle will come into being. The likeability that immoral action will bring forth immoral reaction, as is the case with terrorism vs. counter-terrorism, is very high and becomes very comprehensive from this virtue-ethical perspective.

In a nutshell: the entry point of ethical reflection in a virtue-ethical framework is the reflection of one’s personal life as a whole and the way in which one’s life correspond with one’s notion of one’s final end: human flourishing. From this perspective, terrorism is a symptom of someone’s dissatisfaction with his life and his inability to flourish, mainly caused by the fact that the conditions that are necessary to live a good life are not provided. Even though actor A might believe that his action (terrorism) is legitimate (virtuous) because he believes that his actions serves the goal of realizing the good life, it was shown that the concrete results of his actions do not contribute to the realization of its final end, because it harms the good life of others and consequently its own and can therefore not be actually legitimate (virtuous).

Although a eudemonistic concept of the good life thus delivers a strong account for morally delegitimizing terrorism (because it harms the ability to live a good life), an even more important finding following from this approach is the awareness that terrorism in the first place is symptomatic of a lack of conditions enabling people to strive for their final end: human flourishing. This finding is more important than the fact that virtue ethics indeed also provides a strong account for morally delegitimizing terrorist violence, because it might have important consequences for how we think of legitimate and sustainable counter-terrorism as will be further discussed in the next section.

**Counter-terrorism and the good life of others**

In the last section it was argued that, from a virtue-ethical perspective, terrorism can be delegitimized because of the fact that terrorism disables human beings to live a life in accordance with their final end. In particular, terrorism threatens the state respectively the political community. Since, according to Aristotle, a functioning state is the precondition for human flourishing, terrorism threatens eudemonia, or the good life. Ignoring the principle debate on what kind of political constitution is the best for humans to attain eudemonia, discussions that in the past often led to a lot of controversy because of Aristotle’s anti-democratic conservatism, the most important insight of virtue ethics is that a certain political constitution is the precondition for people to live a happy life. Not every constitution contributes to eudemonia to the same degree, and especially lacking political stability or the lack of just institutions decisively endanger the good life of people. In other words, both institutions and political constitution should enable people to develop the virtues, respectively to fully enfold their potential. From a virtue-ethical perspective, ethics and politics thus cannot be separated since ‘ethics and politics share a common end, the best human life’ (Garver, 2011, p. 11). The good life can only be realized in a functioning political community, living well only be attained by living together.

Despite the modern critique that virtue ethics is inherently egocentric, this shows that the reflection on one’s personal life is always embedded in the larger realm of the collective in a non-instrumental way. In her book *The morality of happiness*, Julia Annas (1993)
also points out at the necessary connection between self-concern and other-concern. She persuasively shows that eudemonistic conceptions of (virtue) ethics offer a lot of space for other-concern, instead of egocentric self-concern. Although virtue ethics reveal some substantial self-concern, because it is always oriented towards the reflection of one’s individual life, Annas shows that eudemonistic theories indeed deliver an account for high demands of other-concern.

This other-concern is based on the idea that in order for me to live a good life, I am dependent on others. I cannot live a good life as long as I do not care for the other’s capacity of living a good life. Although it might appear as if the good life of others is in this case only instrumental to my own good life, Annas shows that this is not the case. Other-concern, from a eudaimonistic perspective, is indeed a good in itself. In some cases ‘our own good is expanded to include the good of these others’ (Annas, 1992, p. 136). In eudemonistic theory this non-instrumental other-concern is called *philia*, which translation as ‘friendship’ might not do justice to the more complex meaning of the concept. ‘Aristotle argues that *philia* is required for the agent to achieve a satisfactory specification of his final end; to achieve my own good, I must include the good of others in my final end, and give it intrinsic value’ (Annas, 1992, p. 37). Although the Aristotelian account of *philia*, other-concern is seriously limited regarding its scope, there are no reasons to think that a eudaimonistic concept of the good life ought not to include an account of other-concern with a scope that goes beyond personal relations we have with others.

Because of the interdependency of an individual’s good life and the good life of others, because of the fact that living well can only be attained within the political community, that both ethics and political arrangement contribute to the realization of an individual’s final end, a virtue-ethical framework offer an interesting alternative for reflecting on ethical questions of counter-terrorism. If human flourishing is an interest of every human being, preserving and protecting the ability to live a good life should be the main interest of a political community. It was argued that terrorism seriously endangers the political constitution that is the precondition for living a good life. However, coercive counter-terrorism measures have similar consequences. They destabilize already instable political communities and even further disable others to live a good life. As a consequence, because of the natural interdependency of my good life and the good life of others, counter-terrorism measures that neglect other-concern will have the opposite effect on ‘our’ good life and will, instead of securing the conditions for living a good life, lead to disabling our own good life. Coercive, militarized counter-terrorism can be delegitimized by the same argumentation, that those measures harm the good life of others and consequently the good life within the own community. It produces and reinforces a vicious cycle of vicious behavior.

When we accept the fact that both terrorism and coercive/militarized counter-terrorism is a symptom of a dissatisfaction with one’s own life, with a discontinuity between living conditions and the ability of realizing one’s final end (happiness), then a virtue-ethical framework offers a whole new perspective for reflecting on what kind of counter-terrorism action might be sustainable and morally justifiable. If a good life can only be attained when the good life of others is respected and included in one’s own final end, then counter-terrorism that naturally aims at protecting, preserving or restore the good life ought to respect the good life of others and ought to avoid harming the conditions
enabling others to live a good life. Furthermore, the insight that terrorism is also a
symptom of dissatisfaction and inability of living a good life, should promote action
that counteract dissatisfaction, since enabling others to realize their final end will ulti-
mately contribute to my own ability of realizing my final end.

Concretely this would implicate that counter-terrorism should be oriented at facilitating
political constitutions and institutions that enable others to live a good life. This approach
could have a lot in common with Martha Nussbaum’s thoughts on social justice, which are
also inspired by Aristotelian virtue ethics (cf. Nussbaum, 2011). The concrete implications of
this approach to counter-terrorism cannot be discussed in depth now, but some examples
will be given to get a first impression of the radical difference between contemporary con-
ceptionalization of counter-terrorism and the one that would follow from the approach
outlined in this paper. The central aims of a political conceptualization of counter-terrorism
following from this approach should, for example, be the stabilization of conflicting politi-
cal relations and interests, the enhancement of socio-economic living conditions and the
empowerment of communities. As a result, counter-terrorism might then contribute to the
reduction of sensitivity for terrorist ideologies through offering new perspectives by,
among other things, promoting education and realistic job opportunities. If counter-terror-
ism succeeds in increasing the ability of others to live a good life through reinforcing (pol-
itical) arrangements and institutions that contribute to human flourishing, it will reduce
the likeability of people resorting to terrorist violence and will so contribute to the pres-
ervation of the conditions that are needed for the realizing human flourishing within
the own political community.

Conclusion

This paper showed that because of the difficulties that accompany the debate on the defi-
nition and (moral) nature of terrorism, conventional act-centered, utilitarian or deontolo-
gical ethical frameworks for the moral assessment of terrorism and counter-terrorism are
confronted with substantial limitations. It was argued that there are three important con-
stituents of terrorism that should figure in a comprehensive moral account of terrorism in
order to respect terrorism’s moral complexity as well as the singularity of terrorism cases. It
was shown that only an alternative, more integrative ethical framework might succeed in
delivering such an account. Subsequently, it was proposed that virtue ethics might fulfill
the requirements of this integrative ethical framework and the manifold benefits of a
virtue-ethical framework were discussed. Ultimately, through the discussion of a eudemo-
nistic concept of the good life, it was shown how a virtue-ethical framework might offer a
fruitful alternative way of morally assessing terrorism and counter-terrorism. By means of a
conclusion, it was pointed at the fact that a virtue-ethical approach towards issues of ter-
rorism and counter-terrorism allows us to broaden the range of morally relevant features
of terrorism by making the entry point of ethical reflection agent-oriented instead of act-
oriented, reveal and counter the ontological assumptions that are inherent to ‘conven-
tional’ ways of reflecting on terrorism and counter-terrorism and allow us to take into
account issues on justice and other-concern when reflecting on morally legitimate and
sustainable ways of countering terrorism. A virtue-ethical approach to the moral
problem of terrorism and counter-terrorism will foster a more profound understanding
of the terrorist phenomenon in general, of its dynamics and of sustainable and morally
tenable ways of countering terrorism. Counter-terrorism strategies that are able to comprehensively take into account the ethics of terrorism as framed in this paper, have the task to be morally critical vis-a-vis their own conceptualization and will need to reflect on alternative non-coercive ways of countering terrorism. Only when the ‘bad life’ of terrorism is understood as a task to contribute to making it the good life of others, the flourishing life within the own community will be safeguarded long-term.

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