

The Islamic Terrorist Approached as There-being: An Existential-Phenomenological Analysis

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Almost four hundred lives were lost to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. One week after the incident the FBI reported that it had suspects but “no clear motive” (King, 1993, p. 1). Over three thousand lives were lost to the 2001 World Trade Center and Pentagon strikes, and it was only a matter of hours before President Bush vowed to “hunt down” the terrorists, presumably Islamic, that attacked these sites (Kranish, 2001). Clearly our understanding of the Islamic terrorist — his genesis, development, and worldview — has evolved over the last decade, but to where? Is that understanding as comprehensive as we would like given the historical challenges we now face? The terms we use to name these actors point to the status of that understanding. We commonly speak of Islamic terrorists as “evil doers,” “evil madmen,” “Islamic fundamentalists,” “Islamists,” “Islamic rogues,” and “Islamic radicals” and describe their situation as part of an “axis of evil” and the “clash of civilizations.”

Although historically relevant, the terms we assign to the Islamic terrorist reveal a hidden tendency to objectify the actor. Said simply, they are epistemologically prejudiced. The terrorist is approached not as a World achieved in the process of becoming but as a subject objectified in contradistinction to the world. The language we use to describe him and the readiness with which we use it tends to carry our thinking along a predetermined, one-dimensional track that ultimately obfuscates our understanding of *who he is*; indeed, who “we ourselves *are* . . . each of us” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 13). It lacks ontological sensibility and loses sight of the fundamental fact that this being (as all human beings) is *defined by his manner of Being*.

The term existential-phenomenology uses to describe humankind's manner of Being is *There-being*. There-being (*Dasein*, being-in-the-World) conveys the full significance of

man's to-be: its (finite) transcendence to an achievement of World. Man's manner of Being is to-be (transcend to) There, in/with the World. The World is the "happening" that doesn't simply happen; that is, man's Being is not inert. It is determined by its comprehension of Being, or existence. There-being is a meaning matrix (Total Meaningfulness) in the process of continually becoming that which it already is: its existence (Kovacs, 1990, p. 224; Richardson, 1967, pp. 34-37, 67).

Language and action are fundamental to existence. Both are forms of *logos*. Both manifest and locate the Being of There-being. The dual nature of *logos* — its ability to show Being and structure transcendence — differentiates it as a pathway for existential-phenomenological analysis, one that has direct relevance to understanding the existence of the Islamic terrorist. The terrorist's words and deeds, even those that aim at disinformation and propaganda, reveal who he is as Total Meaningfulness. They are concrete commentaries by that being on what it means for him to-be-in-the-World, rendering to existential-phenomenological analysis the history, structure and course of his existence.

This study works to make ontological sense of who the Islamic terrorist is through an existential-phenomenological interpretation of his acts and statements. The light these paths shine is not bright. The quality of information available, much of which comes from common media sources, is thin and a more exhaustive analysis would have required, indeed, would have been, an exhaustive ethnography. Obvious reasons did not allow for the first-person exchange.

Petition to the Divine

Abu Bakar Bassyir heads the Jemaah Islamiah, a terrorist organization in Indonesia. In January 2001, he "declared that the United States was 'the terrorist nation'" and, appealing to Islamic revelation, "'rejoiced because it seemed Allah punished the United States for its arrogant behavior'" (Perlez, 2002). Sheikh Abu Qatada, a London Muslim cleric who has

been convicted for inciting terrorist acts, said in defense of bin Laden that “it is not the size of the action that matters. It is the reason behind it that matters,” and, like Bassyir, legitimized his position by petitioning Islamic truth. “I am a Muslim who believes in Islam. I believe in jihad and I believe in the necessity of liberating our nation and freeing it from bondage” (2001). Bin Laden’s exclamations follow the same logic. After issuing a “fatwa calling on the Nation to carry on jihad,” he appealed to God in justification of his cause. “We will continue this course,” he states, “because it is a part of our religion, and because God, Praise and Glory be to him, ordered us to carry out jihad so that the word of God may remain exalted to the heights” (Laden, 1999).

The logic Bassyir, Qatada, and bin Laden follow to justify their positions runs the same course. It is a petition to Islam as the truth as embodied in the notion of jihad. Syed Abul Ala Maududi, an early leader of the Islamic fundamentalist party Jamat-e-Islami, defines that notion to be neither a “struggle” nor a “struggle for the Cause of God,” but literally “in the way of God” (Maududi, 1976, p. 7). The terrorist interprets his truth as God’s truth. It is a sacred, irreproachable, absolute that uses man as a vehicle for its realization among men for the sake of that realization. Not only does the terrorist live a radical commitment to a truth he predicates as divine, but that truth obligates his radical commitment. To put this technically, the Islamic terrorist is alienated to his truth.

The terrorist’s relationship to his interpretation of truth, which is itself inclusive in that interpretation, orders his existence; it structures his comprehension of Being and determines the architecture of his World. This study works to disclose that relationship. Its goal is not to understand the content of the terrorist’s interpretation of Islam, but his relationship to that interpretation; that is, the way he approaches his truth. Three questions drive this analysis. First, what is the essence of the terrorist’s relationship to his truth? Second, how does that relationship influence the achievement and structure of his World? And finally, how does the structure of the World he achieves as a result of his relationship to his truth, in turn, affect his existence?

Alienation

The terrorist's relationship to his truth is a commentary on his comprehension of Being, including the Being of other beings, particularly human beings. It is also a commentary on his comprehension of truth, which existential-phenomenology understands as Being disclosed (Heidegger, 1996, p. 85). The relationship between There-being and truth is not one of relativism, but of freedom and immediacy. Truth is disclosed in the act of letting beings (including human beings) be. The fact that humankind's comprehension of Being is a determination of its Being does not exclude it from this assertion. In the final analysis, humankind, Being and truth share the same primacy and are equally original from the existential-phenomenological standpoint.

Humankind alienates its comprehension of Being to any interpretation of truth it predicates as other than Being disclosed. An interpretation of truth predicated as other than Being disclosed will invariably stand, as a phenomenon, "in itself and over and against" existence (Berger & Ullberg, 1965, p. 200). When There-being commits to a truth that is closed to its own primacy, it instrumentalizes its existence to that truth. The *logos* of the Islamic terrorist manifests this mode of to-be. His existence is fugitive to its own achievement. The terrorist is not committed to truth as such, but to his interpretation of Islam as the truth. He is "of [Islamic] truth" (al-Maqdissy, 1997) and follows the way of that truth as the way. As recited by Omar Abdul Rahman (the blind sheik), a mentor of Usama bin Laden and one of the individuals charged with the 1993 World Trade Center bombing:

this way is the same way of our guided predecessors, elaborated by our Lord's Book (the Qur'an) and traditions of our Prophet. My way was not far away from that way. It is the same way of our righteous predecessors which handled Islam as a total entity, that cannot be fragmented or partitioned. It takes all the principles of Islam, all of its rules and does not disregard one aspect at the expense of another. There are some ways which address only the area of faith, area of the acts of worship, the area of transactions or one or other areas of Islam. These are all wrong . . . Allah said in the last verses of the Qur'an: "Today, I have perfected your religion for you, com-

pleted my blessings over you and I am satisfied with Islam as a way of life.” (Rahman, 1996)

For the Islamic terrorist, “the good is that which the religion considers good and the ugly is that which is considered ugly by the religion” and “those who love God and his prophet and this religion may not deny a part of that religion” (Laden, 1999). His truth is circular. It legitimates itself as truth and, in the process, guards itself against transcendence and precludes the spontaneous ability to disclose Being. There-being’s ontological commitment to a system that self-states its legitimacy ultimately encapsulates and distorts its comprehension of Being. The freedom to open to truth as such is rifled in lieu of an ontological commitment to a systematization of truth. For the Islamic terrorist, there is “no other way except [turning] to Islam ideology, to believe in it and to try to change things through it” (al-Fagih, 2001). The Islamic terrorist lives a systematized path toward being with a divine being he posits as the origin, reason and destination of all beings. He holds his existence fugitive to a decision “to live all aspects of life by Islam” (Qatada, 2001) regardless of the fundamental discrepancies that living eventuates, including the moral apathy and probity he shows for his victims. The World of the Islamic terrorist is truncated to his interpretation of truth and, as a result, his freedom, will and openness to Being are alienated to that interpretation.

Reification

The alienation of There-being to a being suggests the reification of both the “self” and the “other.” Man’s being-ness rather than his manner of to-be becomes the standard by which he is judged within the context of the standards set by the object of his alienation, sc., his interpretation of Islam. The reification of the “self” and “other” are coextensive. At the same time There-being objectifies its Being in light of its commitment to an ontic truth, it objectifies the transcendence of the “other” within that same light. The “other” is no longer approached as a World in the process of being achieved but as an object whose significance is set by an ontic standard.

The existence of the Islamic terrorist approximates this path. The terrorist objectifies the existence of the “self” and “other” from the standpoint of his truth. He assigns to both an incorrect and potentially destructive ontological status (Thompson, 1982, p. 88) according to the scale of values that comprise his interpretation of Islam. The terrorist does not approach the “other” according to the primacy it shares with World (and truth), but as a being disenfranchised of his transcendence. “God says fight, for the sake of God and to uphold the name of God,” exclaims one of bin Laden’s lieutenants, Abu Ghaith.

We will fight them with the material and the spiritual strength that we have, and our faith in God . . . The nation must take up its response and in the end I thank God for allowing us to start this jihad. This battle is a decisive battle between faithlessness and faith. And I ask God to give us victory in the face of our enemy and return them defeated. (Ghaith, 2001)

When the “self” and “other” are reified, killing becomes more easily justifiable as a means to realize There-being’s interpretation of truth. The reprehensibility of killing is assuaged because of the structural limitations the terrorist imposes on his comprehension of Being. Alienated to his truth, the Islamic terrorists does not meet the “other” as a Thou — a being in full and free relation to Being — but as an It: a being closed to Being (Buber, 1958, pp. 22-27). The divinity of the terrorist’s truth supersedes There-being’s transcendence. The terrorist doesn’t kill Worlds being achieved. He clears away objects that obstruct the realization of his truth. The Islamic terrorist sees killing the enemies of his truth as “an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country.”

This is in accordance with the words of Almighty Allah, “and fight the pagans all together as they fight you all together,” and “fight them until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah.” (Laden, al-Zawahiri, Taha, Hamzah, & Rahman, 1998)

The testimony of Jamal Ahmed Mohammed al-Fadi, a witness in the World Trade Center bombing trial and former terrorist, shows how the terrorist justifies killing by conceding to the ontological assignments and ontic assessments that comprise his truth.

- Q. Can you tell the jury what discussion was had about whether or not innocent civilians could be killed?
- R. I remember Ibn al Tamiyeh, he said—
- S. Let's stop. Would you just briefly explain to the jury who Ibn al Tamiyeh is?
- T. He's a scholar for Islamic history 1700 or 1800 years ago.
- U. Can you tell us now what Abu Hajer al Iraqi said about Ibn al Tamiyeh?
- A. He said that our time now is similar like in that time, and he say Ibn al Tamiyeh, when a tartar come to Arabic war, Arabic countries that time, he say some Muslims, they help them. And he says Ibn al Tamiyeh, he make a fatwa. He said anybody around the tartar, he buy something from them and he sell them something, you should kill him. And also, if when you attack the tartar, if anybody around them, anything, or he's not military or that — if you kill him, you don't have to worry about that. If he's a good person, he go to paradise and if he's a bad person, he go to hell. (al-Fagih, 2001, p. 269)

The terrorist's reification of the "other" applies equally to Muslims. The Islamic terrorist denudes Muslims of their transcendence and instrumentalizes their being-ness to what he interprets as Islam uncompromised. "Let Muslims make Islam their issue," says Rahman in one of his characteristic exhortations. Muslims should not only "be aware of their obligation to struggle for their religion and to face their enemies," but "make Islam their first priority all the time and to struggle for the sake of Allah" (Rahman, 1996). Fellow terrorists are also reified. Terrorist leaders teach other terrorists "the proper way of worshipping," the "standard" for truth, the "ways and methods of how to worship God," and "how to come closer to God" (al-Ridi, 2001, p. 551).

Rapture

The *logos* of the Islamic terrorist reveals a mode of Being more exhaustive than that conveyed by the terms commonly employed to describe him. His alienation from his interpretation of Islam is an existential commitment that grounds him ontologically by mooring his to-be to an ontic “where-for.” The terrorist encapsulates Being in his truth and hermeneutically fixes his being-in-the-World. The movement is not foreign to everyday life. There-being often resonates with a sense of existential stability due to the commitments it has to the ideas, beliefs, objects, acts and events that vector its transcendence. What sets the terrorist apart from the everyday person, including the Muslim, is the radicality of his commitment and the consequences effected by that radicalization (Peters, 1996, p. 7).

The terrorist is enraptured with the World he achieves as a consequence of his alienation from his interpretation of Islam. He self-charges his existence with the significance of Islam and lays over his World a definitive course and structure reflective of his commitment to his truth. The terrorist is enraptured with his location in that structure and the clarity it speciously bestows on transcendence. He is fugitive to his existence and rapt in the safety of a World divorced of freedom’s liabilities. He has instrumentalized his Being to his interpretation of truth and discharged himself from the prerogatives immanent to the primacy shared by man, World and truth. The terrorist does not take a stand on that primacy, but enthusiastically responds to what he perceives as “a call to mankind” (Sattar, 2001).

The rapture effected by the terrorist’s alienation from his truth comes across in a number of ways, including a sublime certainty in his existence. His alienation charges his existence such that he is categorically closed to the possibility of “otherness” and free from much of the ambiguity and doubt that invariably and to different degrees characterizes transcendence. The terrorist’s comprehension of Being leaves little room for the appresentation of negation common to intentionality (Natanson, 1986, p. 99) and he moves securely within the interpretive horizons delimited by his truth. Most of bin Laden’s statements, including the one given below, tacitly convey this disposition.

Praise be to God, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds. Peace and blessings be upon Prophet Muhammad, his companions and his kin. Let me begin by stating that we, in the World Islamic Front for jihad against Jews and Crusaders, have, by the grace of God Almighty, issued a crystal clear fatwa calling on the Nation to carry on jihad aimed at liberating Islamic holy sites, and the Ancient House (The Holy Ka'aba), and Al-Aksa Mosque and all Islamic lands.

By the grace of God, Praise and Glory be to him; this Nation, the Nation of Muhammad, God's peace and blessings be upon him, has responded to this appeal and this instigation. We will continue this course because it is a part of our religion, and because God, Praise and Glory be to him, ordered us to carry out jihad so that the word of God may remain exalted to the heights. If the instigation for jihad against the Jews and the Americans, in order to liberate Al-Aksa Mosque, and the Holy Ka'aba, is considered a crime, let history be a witness that I am a criminal (Laden, 1999).

The Islamic terrorist polarizes the World into "good" and "evil" and spontaneously locates himself on the "right" side of the World. He lives on the side of good "ready for that big clandestine battle" against "evil" (Fazul, 2001). There-being's polarization of its There and spontaneous self-assignment to the side of "good" fires intentionality hot with righteousness and burns away the shortages of existence. The terrorist's World is not marked by inconsistencies, ambiguities or failures, but decisiveness, truth and accomplishment. His reason-to-be is of his truth; it is divine as he understands divine to be. The disposition is not directly communicated but, like the sublime certainty conveyed in many of the terrorist's statements, permeates his *logos* with its significance. A letter written by Haroun Fazul to his cell leader manifests this disposition as a meaning structure implicit to the terrorist's World. "We can now state that the security position on the cell is at 100 percent danger," Fazul writes.

In this report, I will try to explain the reasons that make us feel that danger (way). I will also try to offer my recommendation to honored and wise high command which I know understands

everything and we hope it is seeking the best. There are many [r]easons that lead me to believe that the cell members in East Africa are in great danger, which leaves us no choice but to think and work hard to foil the enemy's plans who is working day and night to catch one of us or gather more information about any of us. (This report stems from the basic principle that) anyone who studies security matters seriously, will never handle anything carelessly, regardless of how small or great it is, but will take all matters seriously.

The second matter is that I would recommend to the good and wise supreme command which I implore to God to keep safe to work hard to return the caliphate to earth and fight the forces of atheism and dictators who wreaked havoc on earth. We, the East Africa cell members, do not want to know about the operations plans since we are just implementers. We trust our command and appreciate their work and know that they have a lot of problems. But my advise here is for the practical part only since we started the project for "reestablishing the Moslem state" is a collective effort and not an individual one; we are all part of it. So we are asking you, for the sake of organizing the work, to tell us that there is a possible danger that may take place in a while due to a certain decision so we can prepare ourselves accordingly or (so that) we may go underground for a while since our presence might foil or complicate your plans that we know no[t]hing of (2001).

"He is Satan," replied Rahman when asked about his feelings toward Emad Salem, his prosecutor's informant and chief witness in the World Trade Center bombing case (Rahman, 1995). Rahman's answer epitomizes the terrorist's tendency to polarize the World and spontaneously classify himself with the "good." The terrorist divides the There of There-being into believer and non-believers, good and evil, truth and lie, justice and injustice, and invariably locates himself on the "right" side of the World. Rahman identifies this "enjoining good and forbidding evil" as the "dynamo and motor behind Islamic work . . . that preserves Islamic principles" and differentiates the sincere Muslim (Rahman, 1996). Self-elected to the call of Islam, the Islamic terrorist is righteous. He is working in accordance with God's cosmology, God's ideology and God's sociology. Righteousness, as a state of Being, begets its own kind of ecstasy.

Approaching the Islamic terrorist as a manner of Being poses its own challenges, including the innate tendency of transcendence to objectify the World and the importance of objectification to the management of daily life. The conceptualization of There-being invariably implies its objectification. To speak of the terrorist's manner of Being is to objectify his transcendence. The consequence is unavoidable and, for the sake of truth, should be remembered in our interpretations of the Islamic terrorist. The goal of existential-phenomenological analysis, then, is to continuously renew a disposition of openness to Being and work toward increasingly closer approximations of terrorist's existence, rather than stating its claims categorically.

At the same time, alienation, reification, and, to a certain extent, rapture are not foreign to daily life and should not necessarily be decried as existentials. Simply because the terrorist is alienated to his truth does not necessarily indicate that it is a problem that begs solution. Although his acts and statements warrant condemnation, the situation of the Islamic terrorist should not necessarily be disparaged in a time that is increasingly defined by relativism, arbitrariness and ideological non-sense. The terrorist's approach to truth may be fundamentally flawed, but it also seems to provide certain existential rewards found lacking in other cultures. Alienation, reification and rapture are "de facto characteristics of the human condition" that facilitate the species' survival (Berger & Ullberg, 1965, p. 201). Because of its pre-conceptual concern for Being and incessant need to deal with the exigencies of daily life, There-being typically responds to the World as a reality that exists independently of its transcendence (Berger & Luckman, 1966, p. 61). Said differently, we typically facilitate our engagement with beings when we objectify transcendence.

Existential-phenomenology does not replace the language of objectification. Instead, it broadens our understanding of the phenomena to which that language ultimately refers. The value it might add to understanding the existence of the Islamic terrorist lies in its ability to identify the root causes driving his acts. From an existential-phenomenological standpoint, the Islamic terrorist appears to be literally fighting for his existence. His World is radically "on the line." This assertion throws into a different perspective our motivations to interpret and eradicate who the Islamic terrorist is and the tenacity of terrorism approached as a phenomenon. Our failure to comprehend the terrorist's manner of

Being may also be why his acts and statements strike us as enormous in addition to our latent tendency to objectify that actor. It may be more correct, then, to speak of our conflict with the cultures that support terrorism as a clash of meaning rather than a clash of civilizations. The resolution to this conflict would not rest in a common appeal to rights each culture may see as inalienable, but as an appeal to truth as Being disclosed and an acknowledgment of the primacy that There-being shares with that truth.

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