

Is it excessively charitable to describe terrorists as rational agents?

Introduction

In 'By Any Means or None', Nagel (2016) writes of the delusional nature of terrorist movements, stating that their belief that terrorism can help them achieve their goals is plainly irrational. In fact, Nagel (2016) goes as far as to claim that it is excessively charitable to describe terrorists as rational agents. This charge of irrationality is not uncommon; Crenshaw (2015) writes of the importance of neutralising the dangerous stereotype of terrorists as irrational fanatics. I believe such claims that approach terrorism in a reductive and stereotypical manner to be influenced by orientalist assumptions. Orientalism can be understood as the use of specific philosophical and epistemological distinctions to create the divide between the East and West (Said, 1978). The purpose of this paper is to refute the claim that it is excessively charitable to describe terrorists as rational agents by utilising a virtue-theoretic account of rationality with an emphasis on the notions of perfect and imperfect rationality. I will first begin by outlining Audi's (1995) account of rationality. After considering how the virtue-theoretic account of global rationality can be used to prove the rationality of terrorists, I will outline my concerns with using this method, including its potential to reinforce the claim that the belief that terrorism works is plainly irrational. I will then shift the focus of my paper to explaining how the notion of imperfect rationality can be used to disprove charges of irrationality. Before making my concluding remarks, I will further develop this approach to challenge and attempt to neutralise the stereotypical charge of irrationality made against terrorists.

A virtue-theoretic account of rationality

Proving rationality

Rationality can be regarded as a virtue: an excellence possessed by agents (Svavarsdóttir, 2008). Audi's (1995) virtue-theoretic account of 'global rationality' views this excellence as a capacity which accounts for the overall rationality of individuals. To explain, as long as a suitable amount of an agent's beliefs, desires, and actions are individually rational and collectively cohesive, they can be described as rational (Audi, 1995). The individual rationality of the propositional attitudes mentioned is dependent on one's lived experiences, leading Audi (1995) to go as far as to claim that

even a desire to destroy the world can be regarded as rational as long as it would be rewarding to an agent given their personal circumstances. One way of using this account to defend the rationality of terrorism is to argue that terrorists' propositional attitudes and actions are individually rational because they are dependent on their experiences. For example, a terrorist organisation's belief that a certain government is repressive can be seen as the result of its experiences with said government. Regarding the cohesiveness condition, we can draw on Crenshaw's (2015) work on the strategic logic of terrorism to illustrate how terrorists' actions are in harmony with their beliefs and desires. By using violence to invite government repression, terrorists can simultaneously demonstrate their belief that a certain government is repressive while potentially fulfilling their desire to spread discontent (Crenshaw, 2015). In this sense, terrorists can be seen to succeed in being rational by exercising the virtue of rationality.

There are several issues with the above approach, I will acknowledge two of them. The first is that, as Heikes (2010) points out, the overly permissible nature of the account can be seen to abandon the normative force of rationality. This potential flaw can be used to question the soundness of the above account of the rationality of terrorists. My primary concern with the above method is that it can be used to reinforce the common criticism that Nagel (2016) and others have made regarding the rationality of terrorists: the claim that it is irrational to believe that terrorism works. Assuming that the belief that terrorism works is plainly false, it cannot be based on terrorists' experiences as terrorists would have presumably not experienced terrorism working first-hand. In this sense, the belief that terrorism works can be seen as both false and irrational.

Disproving irrationality

The aspect of Audi's theory that I am particularly interested in, however, is the fact that only a suitable amount of an agent's propositional attitudes and actions need to be rational and coherent for them to be seen to exercise the virtue of rationality. One might ask what counts as a 'suitable amount' (Heikes, 2010). For Svavarsdóttir (2008), an agent must frequently and severely fail at meeting the conditions of rationality in order to be described as overall irrational; instances of failing to meet the set conditions of rationality merely demonstrate the fact that an agent is imperfectly rational. This leads me to suggest the primary benefit of using this conception of rationality is the fact that it assumes all agents to be at least somewhat rational until proven otherwise. Under this assumption, rather than adopting an exclusively defensive strategy of proving the rationality of terrorists in order to refute the claim that it is excessively charitable to describe terrorists as rational agents, we can add an offensive dimension to the strategy by calling the charge of irrationality into question.

Imperfect rationality: challenging the charge of irrationality.

While it is possible to refute the above objection by proving that terrorism works, I am not interested in doing so. Instead, I am going to accept the claim that the belief that terrorism works is irrational for the sake of developing my argument. Even if we were to suppose all terrorists do possess the plainly irrational belief that terrorism works, assuming that all agents possess some degree of rationality, this objection can at best be used to describe terrorists as imperfectly rational. This is because terrorists presumably possess a number of other beliefs which meet Audi's (1995) criteria for rationality, such as the belief that they are outmanned and outgunned, for example (Pape, 2006). I do not deem it necessary to prove the perfect rationality of terrorists, not because I regard them as irrational fanatics, but because I do not believe such a level of rationality to be attainable. Perfect rationality can be viewed as an 'unrealistic ideal' for anyone, simply because rationality is confined by human imperfections (Svavarsdóttir, 2008; Nalbandov, 2013). It seems implausible that any rational agent would be able to strike the perfect balance between the conditions of any account of rationality in any given situation (Svavarsdóttir, 2008). I view holding terrorists to an unattainable standard which I would not hold myself or anyone else to as an insidious form of othering. Given that terrorists are imperfectly rational, be it more or less rational than the mean, it is not excessively charitable to describe them as rational agents.

A possible response to the above could be to point out the fact that terrorists ought to be held to a different standard due to the contextual nature of rationality Audi (1995) appears to present. For example, one could argue that fewer irrational beliefs ought to be permitted when lives are at stake. I would potentially agree with this line of reasoning if I believed that other groups were held to the same standard. Would a group of Western soldiers fighting an unwinnable war be as hastily charged with the same accusation of plain irrationality for falsely believing that they could win their war? What about a pair of acclaimed architects who make an error while designing a building which now has the potential to collapse? I would imagine both groups mentioned would not be met with the reductive charges of irrationality due to the absence of particular stereotypes. As previously mentioned, I believe that the charge of absolute irrationality commonly made against terrorists is influenced by orientalism.

When one makes the orientalist claim that terrorists are irrational agents, they are reducing the agents in question to one thing: a terrorist. Orientalism can blind us from acknowledging the fact that terrorists can be many things at once and have ends which have nothing to do with terrorism

and its goals. For example, in an analysis of the socio-economic status of a terrorist organisation, Pape (2006) found that 76% were part of the working or middle class. The terrorists investigated were technicians, policemen and teachers (Pape, 2006), who likely possessed rationally justified beliefs regarding their professions and other matters that are entirely unrelated to terrorism. In this sense, even if we were to accept the notion that any belief associated with employing terrorism is irrational, we would still be able to describe terrorists as imperfectly rational.

Conclusion

To conclude, this essay argues that it is not excessively charitable to describe terrorists as rational agents. I have argued that even if terrorists are proven to possess irrational beliefs, they can still be considered to be rational agents. Drawing on Audi's (1995) virtue theoretic account of global rationality, this paper outlines how an agent only needs a suitable amount of cohesive rational beliefs, desires, and actions to be considered rational. While Audi's (1995) highly permissive conditions for rationality can be called into question, the account's concern with the notion of overall rationality can be used to conceptualise rationality as a spectrum with the two extremes of perfect rationality and perfect irrationality. The concept of imperfect rationality provides a framework for understanding rationality as a virtue that agents possess until otherwise is proven. From this starting point, charges of plain irrationality can be called into question by considering the different ways in which terrorists do meet a suitable amount of the conditions of rationality. Even if we are to assume that the belief that terrorism works is plainly irrational, this assumption can, at best, prove terrorists to be imperfectly rational as they likely possess other rational beliefs about a myriad of different matters. This paper implied that viewing terrorists as imperfectly rational to be sufficient as holding them to a higher unattainable standard of perfect rationality is unnecessary and potentially an insidious means of othering.

References

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