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HUMILITY AND TERRORISM STUDIES

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Abstract: Intellectual humility requires a willingness to acknowledge and take ownership of one's intellectual limitations. These limitations include gaps in knowledge. Owning limitations that result from wilful ignorance is false rather than genuine intellectual humility. Other forms of false humility include owning gaps in our knowledge that do not exist or that can easily be closed. In these terms, some accounts of our supposedly limited knowledge of the root causes and motives of terrorism are expressions of false humility. False humility is especially prevalent in relation to Middle Eastern, 'new terrorism', whose practitioners are assumed to be irrational and unknowable. The representation of terrorism and terrorists as beyond rational comprehension is a form of 'othering'. The othering of Middle Eastern terrorism is rooted in what Edward Said describes as the Orientalist myth of the alien and fundamentally irrational Orient. There are strong empirical and conceptual objections to this approach. True intellectual humility in terrorism studies means recognising the inability of general models of terrorism to explain why some people but not others in the same situation resort to terrorism. Particularism emphasises the need for a biographical understanding of individual terrorists, and the reliance of this type of understanding on empathy.

1

In a memoir published a decade after the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, former U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld reflected on an aphorism with which he will forever

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be associated.¹ According to Rumsfeld, there are known knowns, things we know we know, known unknowns, things we know we don't know, and unknown unknowns, things we don't know we don't know. The category of unknown unknowns points to gaps in our knowledge that we don't know exist. Prior to 9/11, Rumsfeld claimed, nineteen hijackers using commercial aircraft as guided missiles was an unknown unknown. Recognizing that there are things we don't know we don't know can be regarded as a form of intellectual humility. This is how Rumsfeld puts it:

The idea of known and unknown unknowns recognizes that the information those in positions of responsibility in government, as well as in other human endeavors, have at their disposal is almost always incomplete. It emphasizes the importance of intellectual humility, a valuable attribute in decision making and in formulating strategy (2011: xvi).

In support of this approach, Rumsfeld quotes Socrates' assertion that the beginning of wisdom is the realization of how little one truly knows. In Rumsfeld's eyes, Rumsfeldian humility is Socratic humility. Of course, we know nothing about any specific unknown unknown but that doesn't prevent us from justifiably believing in the existence of particular truths that we don't know we don't know: 'there are things of which we are so unaware, we don't even know we are unaware of them' (Rumsfeld 2011: xvi).

Rumsfeldian humility pertains to the ability of governments to predict future terrorist attacks but a different form of intellectual humility concerns our understanding of what makes terrorists tick. It is often claimed that terrorists are evil and irrational. From this, some have concluded that 'one cannot - and indeed should not - know them' (Stampnitzky 2013: 189).² The types of knowledge at issue in such formulations include knowledge of (a) the root causes of terrorism and (b) terrorists' motives and objectives. It has been argued that in order to acquire knowledge of these things, especially (b), one would have to engage with what Zulaika calls

the ‘desires and subjectivities’ (2012: 53) of terrorists.³ This is what some scholars regard as problematic, especially in relation to the so-called ‘new’ terrorism, a form of terrorism with supposedly ‘unlimited and non-negotiable’ ends and ‘incomprehensible and amorphous’ aims (Crenshaw 2011: 54).⁴ The perpetrators of 9/11 were ‘new’ terrorists. Members of the IRA and other such organisations were ‘old’ terrorists, people with negotiable and limited goals.

The notion that new terrorism is incomprehensible has had a range of negative impacts on the study of terrorism. Even if it is false, the belief that we cannot know the answer to certain questions can make it harder to know the answer to those questions. Pessimism about the extent of our knowledge can be self-fulfilling, even if it is motivated by intellectual humility. Since intellectual humility is widely regarded as an intellectual virtue it would be both surprising and disappointing if this epistemic posture gets in the way of knowledge, perhaps by encouraging us to abandon the pursuit of certain types of knowledge. Intellectual virtues are supposed to be epistemically beneficial, to abet rather than obstruct knowledge. It is therefore important to decide whether Rumsfeldian humility and its variants are expressive of genuine intellectual humility. If not, why not? If so, then either it is false that Rumsfeldian humility has negative epistemological consequences or intellectual virtues are not always epistemically beneficial. Is it possible that the study of terrorism is a domain in which intellectual humility gets in the way of knowledge?

Intellectual humility has been described as ‘self-centred’ (Tanesini 2018: 408). The force of this description can be brought out by noting that humility involves self-acceptance. Humility, as Tanesini notes, is ‘importantly concerned with human limitations in general and one’s own limitations in particular’ (2018: 404). Intellectual humility has also been seen as a matter of having the right stance towards one’s intellectual limitations, of being ‘appropriately attentive to them and to *own* them’ (Whitcomb et al 2017: 516). These limitations include gaps in our knowledge and restrictions in our ability to know certain truths. These gaps can be

explained in two different ways. If a person S fails to know that P this might say more about S than about P. For example, if P is knowable by S without excessive cognitive labour then S's ignorance may have more to do with S than with P. In this case, S's ignorance is avoidable. A different case is one in which S's ignorance has more to do with the nature of P. It could be that S doesn't know that P because P is unknowable, either by S or more generally. In acknowledging and owning this gap in her knowledge S would be acknowledging her *unavoidable* ignorance. Since there is no way for S to close this gap in her knowledge she can't fairly be criticised for her ignorance.

A particular form of avoidable ignorance is *wilful ignorance*.⁵ S may fail to know whether P not because she can't know but because she doesn't want to know. Even if S is happy to 'own' this gap in her knowledge, one might be reluctant to regard this as genuine intellectual humility.⁶ Another case is one in which it is possible for S to know whether P but she makes no effort to know because she unjustifiably believes it is impossible to know. S owns what she sees as her intellectual limitations with respect to P but these limitations aren't genuine. In this case, S is guilty of a form of what might be called *false humility*. A different form of false humility consists in claiming not to know whether P even though one does know. The result is *unacknowledged knowledge* or an '*unknown known*' (Jackson 2012).⁷

Do any of these descriptions apply to Rumsfeldian humility? When students of 'new' terrorism proclaim their ignorance of its motives and causes is their ignorance genuine? If so, is it avoidable or unavoidable ignorance? While genuine intellectual humility is essential for the effective study of terrorism, it is arguable that the intellectual humility on display in some influential accounts of terrorism is false. How is this false humility to be accounted for? One hypothesis is that false humility, especially in relation to Islam-related terrorism, is rooted in a desire to provide an intellectual justification for contentious anti-terrorist policies. Another is that pointing to the unknowability of a particular form of terrorism is a highly effective means

of emphasising the radical alienness of those responsible for it. The ‘othering’ of some forms of terrorism but not others can, according to this hypothesis, only be properly understood by reference to the tenets of what Edward Said calls ‘Orientalism’.⁸

The next sections will be divided as follows: section 2 will expose the extent to which the study of terrorism has been shaped by wilful ignorance and false humility. The discussion will also bring into focus difficulties in understanding the claim that intellectual humility involves owning one’s intellectual limitations. As will also become apparent, the notion of an intellectual limitation is far from straightforward. Section 3 will explore the relations between false humility and othering. Finally, section 4 will argue that proper intellectual humility in the study of terrorism requires acknowledging and owning *genuine* limitations in our ability to comprehend terrorism, while refraining from representing avoidable ignorance as unavoidable. One such limitation will be identified and discussed.

2

In her account of the evolution of terrorism studies Lisa Stampnitzky analyses what she calls the ‘politics of anti-knowledge’ (2013: 187). This consists in an active refusal to seek knowledge of the motives or root cases of terrorism.⁹ As an epistemic posture, anti-knowledge can be explained and understood in two different ways. On one interpretation, the point is not that knowledge of terrorism and terrorists is impossible but that one ought not to seek it. This can in turn be understood as a moral or as a political ‘ought’. Either way, it is a matter of choice or decision not to address certain questions about terrorism. On a different interpretation, an anti-knowledge posture is a reasonable response to the fact that it is impossible to explain or understand terrorism. On this view, terrorism is not subject to rational understanding so trying to understand it is futile.

An example of the first approach can be found in the work of Alan M. Dershowitz. He argues that terrorism works because its perpetrators take it to be an effective means of drawing

attention to their grievances. They are encouraged in this belief by the fact that governments have been receptive to suggestions that in order to respond effectively to terrorism they must first understand it. In contrast, Dershowitz recommends a policy of never responding to acts of terrorism by attending to terrorists' grievances, real or otherwise, or to the supposed root causes of terrorism. The clear message to terrorists should be: 'even if you have legitimate grievances, if you resort to terrorism as a means toward eliminating them we will simply not listen to you, we will not try to understand you, and we will certainly not change any of our policies toward you' (2002: 25). There is no suggestion here that terrorism is incapable of being understood. Dershowitz's argument for wilful ignorance is fundamentally political or strategic rather than epistemological.¹⁰

The ethical argument for wilful ignorance is 'we ought not to seek to know terrorists, for such knowledge is potentially contaminating' (Stampnitzky 2013: 189). One concern is that any serious attempt to understand the motivations of terrorists will require a degree of empathy that might be seen as morally problematic. Without empathy there is little chance of engaging with the subjectivity of terrorists, and without doing that we are unlikely to grasp their motives.¹¹ Empathy is 'emotionally charged perspective-taking' (Bailey 2018: 143). It involves 'using one's imagination to "transport" oneself' and consider someone else's situation as though one were occupying their position (Bailey 2018: 143). On this account, empathising is closely relating to sympathising. This explains why some argue that we should be very reluctant to empathise with individuals, such as the nineteen 9/11 hijackers, who are guilty of mass murder. Refusing to empathise means refusing to understand but there is no alternative to wilful ignorance if one wishes to avoid contamination or 'moral confusion' (Jones & Smith 2006: 1083).

There are several questions about the merits of these approaches. English argues, in opposition to Dershowitz, that if we have any serious interest in curtailing terrorism we *do* need

to understand it: ‘understanding something is a necessary part of effectively fighting against it’ (2009: 28). In addition, the risks of moral contamination are exaggerated by ethical arguments for wilful ignorance. One can empathise with some aspects of the motivations of terrorists with genuine grievances without approving of what they do in pursuit of their objectives. There need be no moral confusion in an inquiry into the root causes of terrorism. It is also doubtful whether it is possible, in practice, to avert one’s eyes from the motives of terrorists who make it plain why they act as they do. One might take the view that the explanations and justifications of their actions offered by terrorists are bogus but this means engaging with the very questions of explanation and motivation that those who recommend a policy of wilful ignorance wish to avoid.

Dershowitz’s view is unusual among terrorism scholars. Most argue not that we *should not* understand terrorism but that we *cannot* understand it, at least if the terrorism in question is of the newer variety. We cannot understand it because it is not *subject* to rational understanding. Accepting this is therefore a case of acknowledging an unavoidable gap in our knowledge. For example, in his *The New Terrorism*, Walter Laqueur describes new terrorists as ‘divorced from rational thought’ (1999: 5).¹² Indeed, this is one of the bases on which ‘new’ terrorism is distinguished from ‘old’ terrorism. Those who subscribe to this distinction see old terrorism as rational and realistic and new terrorism as megalomaniacal, paranoid and delusional. On this account, new terrorists have ‘an altogether different logic’ (Sprinzak 2001: 73) from their predecessors and this is what makes them so hard to fathom. It is not a matter of being ‘anti-knowledge’ but of being realistic and accepting genuine limitations in our ability to understand people who are capable of such actions as beheading a hostage with a butcher’s knife or massacring fifty worshippers in a mosque in New Zealand.

To what extent, if any, is wilful ignorance an expression of intellectual humility? One issue is how to understand the notion of an ‘intellectual limitation’ in accounts of this type of

humility. Examples of intellectual limitations include gaps in knowledge, cognitive mistakes, unreliable cognitive processes, deficits in learnable skills and intellectual character flaws.¹³ Suppose that wilful ignorance results in a gap in a person's knowledge or understanding of terrorism. There is no reason to deny that the wilfully ignorant subject is aware of the gap in her knowledge and is in this sense attentive to an intellectual limitation. She therefore satisfies at least one condition on intellectual humility. Does she also satisfy the further condition that she *owns* her limitation? It would seem so. Like Dershowitz, she might even be *proud* of her ignorance to the extent that that she sees it as a political or ethical necessity. It has been argued that fully 'owning' one's intellectual limitations means, among other things, viewing them with 'regret or dismay' on the basis that they have negative outcomes (Whitcomb et al. 2017: 519). There is also the idea that owning a limitation means caring enough about it to be motivated to overcome it if at all possible. However, while the wilfully ignorant subject doesn't regret her lack of knowledge, she rejects the assumption that her ignorance is undesirable.¹⁴ If there are desirable gaps in knowledge, or intellectual limitations that have positive outcomes, then it should be possible to own such limitations without regretting them or seeking to overcome them.

Despite these considerations, there are good reasons not to regard ownership of gaps in knowledge that result from wilful ignorance as genuine intellectual humility. One is that, as suggested above, those who recommend wilful ignorance in response to terrorism exaggerate the political and ethical benefits of this epistemic posture. It is also worth noting that when intellectual humility is described as requiring ownership of one's intellectual limitations it is generally assumed that the limitations in question aren't voluntary or self-imposed. Acceptance of intellectual limitations is not genuine humility if they are taken to be ones that could easily be overcome by subjects who care to know. Not caring to know is not humility, intellectual or otherwise. Furthermore, trying not to understand the root causes of terrorism, or the motives of

terrorists, won't result in *actual* gaps in knowledge if those causes and motives are all too obvious. One can adopt the policy of refusing to take such considerations into account but that is a different matter from genuinely not knowing. If there is no actual gap in one's knowledge then there is, at least in this sense, no intellectual limitation for one to own or accept. Talk of intellectual humility in this context is disingenuous.

It is a different matter if the intellectual limitations that a person purports to own are ones they take to be involuntary and a reflection of the inherent difficulty of the subject matter rather than the result of a policy of wilful ignorance. Acknowledging and regretting what one sees as insuperable cognitive obstacles to acquiring knowledge of a given subject matter sounds more like intellectual humility.¹⁵ Yet, even here, much depends on whether the belief that the obstacles to knowledge are insuperable is itself a justified belief. If not, then the result is false intellectual humility rather than the real thing. It is false humility to insist that it is not possible for one to know whether P when it is possible to know and the belief that it is not possible to know is, in the circumstances, unreasonable. *Genuine* intellectual humility is a matter of acknowledging and owning *genuine* intellectual limitations. It is incompatible with laying claim to intellectual limitations that one ought to know are spurious.

The case for detecting false humility in some branches of terrorism studies is a strong one. The difficulties begin with the distinction between 'old' and 'new' terrorism. As Martha Crenshaw notes, an examination of the objectives, methods and structures of what is said to be new and what is said to be old terrorism 'reveals numerous similarities rather than differences'. Accordingly, 'it cannot really be said that there are two fundamental types of terrorism' (2011: 66). 'New' terrorists have been described as apolitical, 'megalomaniacal hyperterrorists' (Sprinzak 2001: 73) for whom killing is an end in itself. Yet there is ample evidence that, just like 'old' terrorists, such individuals are politically motivated and see violence as a means to a political end. On a politico-rational interpretation, terrorism is 'a form of political behavior

resulting from the deliberate choice of a basically rational actor' (Crenshaw 2011: 66). For example, Osama bin Laden's stated goal was the expulsion of American forces from Muslim territories. His reasoning might have been flawed but was not patently illogical, given such historical precedents as the American defeat in Vietnam and the expulsion of Soviet forces from Afghanistan.¹⁶ There is no indication that new terrorists operate with an altogether different logic.

The collapse of the distinction between old and new terrorism calls into question any notion that terrorism scholars and policy makers face a special problem identifying the motives and root causes of new terrorism. While it is possible that people are deluded about their own motives, one would need to have a special reason for rejecting terrorists' accounts of their own motives. One report suggests between 2006 and 2009 US drone strikes in Pakistan killed just 14 Al-Qaeda leaders but as many as 700 civilians in the same area.¹⁷ A 2007 UN report concluded that U.S air strikes were 'among the principle motivations for suicide bombers in Afghanistan' (Sluka 2011: 72). A survey of 42 Taliban fighters revealed that 12 had seen family members killed in air strikes and 6 had joined the insurgency as a direct result of this.¹⁸ It would be perverse and an example of false humility to insist that we cannot know motivations of such individuals. This is not to say that a desire for vengeance motivates all forms of terrorism. As English notes, 'the vital importance of ideological conviction.... must be taken into account when explaining why so many people act in the extreme manner characteristic of terrorists' (2009: 49). The person responsible for the New Zealand mosque massacre emailed an ideological manifesto to the office of the Prime Minister before opening fire. Many other terrorists have been motivated by ideological convictions. The fact that these convictions are deeply flawed does not make the motives of such individuals impossible to understand.

It is no more plausible that the root causes of terrorism are unfathomable, though it is undeniable that the issue is a complex one. To the extent that it is possible to generalise about

the causes of terrorism it would seem that what English calls a ‘multi-causal’ approach is called for.¹⁹ Not surprisingly, there isn’t a single cause but a multiplicity of causal factors. Contrary to what one might have expected, ‘poverty is not a root cause of terrorism’ (Silke 2014: 46). More relevant factors are political repression, lack of political representation, and ‘catalyst events’ (Silke 2014: 55) that create martyrs to be avenged.²⁰ Important work has also been done on the role of kinship and friendship networks in persuading some individuals to turn to political violence. As Marc Sageman has shown, a terrorist group can be a “bunch of guys” bonded to one another by more than just politics.²¹

When Rumsfeld emphasizes the importance of intellectual humility he is specifically concerned with humility regarding our knowledge of the mode and timing of terrorist attacks. It is hard to argue with the suggestion that our knowledge of the specifics of terrorist attacks is limited but it is also important not to exaggerate these limits. A month before the 9/11 attacks President Bush received an intelligence briefing regarding bin Laden’s determination to strike in the U.S.²² The precise date of such an attack was unknown but this was a known unknown rather than an unknown unknown. While the use of commercial aircraft as missiles was unprecedented, there were indications of individuals of investigative interest attending flight schools in Arizona.²³ No doubt there are unknown unknowns but there is also plenty that is knowable and known about terrorist attacks, including their methods and approximate timing. When attacks like 9/11 come as a complete surprise, the surprise is more often due to failures in the collection and processing of intelligence than to deep obstacles to knowledge.

To sum up: despite numerous references to our unavoidable ignorance of the motives, causes and specifics of terrorism, a great deal about these matters is known. It is hard to justify a policy of wilful ignorance in relation to terrorism and just as hard to justify the belief that knowledge of these matters is, for us, unattainable. The “humility” of terrorism scholars who are impressed by how little is known and knowable about their subject matter is therefore false

rather than true humility. Above all, it is perverse to insist that terrorism is beyond rational comprehension. It is possible, in theory, that it isn't widely known how much is known about terrorism. In Jackson's terminology, this would make terrorism an unknown known. In reality, however, false humility is more likely to be the result of an unwillingness to *acknowledge* how much is known than by a failure to *know* how much is known. This raises a question: how is such unacknowledged knowledge to be explained? More generally, what accounts for false humility in the study of terrorism? This is the next question to be addressed.

3

In the world of *realpolitik*, claims about how much or little is knowable about terrorism have as much to do with the policy objectives of governments as with epistemological reality. For example, the Bush administration was warned by intelligence professionals that its 2003 invasion of Iraq would strengthen the hand of anti-American terrorist organisations based in the Middle East. These warnings were ignored, and false humility played a significant role in the administration's approach. It represented the relationship between Iraq and Al-Qaeda as unknown and took military action against Iraq to pre-empt the possibility of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction falling into the hands of Al-Qaeda. In reality, Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction and no working relationship with Al-Qaeda. These things could and should have been known by policy makers in Washington but they concentrated instead on pressuring the intelligence community to come up with evidence that supported their assumptions.²⁴ In place of evidence based policy, the administration relied on policy based evidence.

According to what came to be known as the 'Cheney doctrine', 'even if there's just a one per cent chance of the unimaginable coming true, act as if it is a certainty' (Suskind 2007: 62). While it is hardly unimaginable that weapons of mass destruction will one day fall into the hands of terrorists, the real purpose of the doctrine was to suggest that in order to be justified in taking pre-emptive military action against Iraq it wasn't necessary to *know* or have *evidence*

that there was a real threat of such a thing happening in Iraq. In effect, the administration's pre-emptive action was based on its supposed *ignorance* of the threat, by what it insisted with false humility was a gap in its knowledge. The rationale for its Iraq policy was what Stampnitzky calls a 'logic of pre-emption' (2013: 174), one that was rooted in the administration's militant anti-knowledge posture.

Pointing to the unknowability of a particular form of terrorism is not just a way to justify certain types of pre-emptive action. It is an effective means of underlining the alienness of its perpetrators. A useful concept in this connection is that of *othering*. This has been defined as 'the attribution of relative inferiority and/or radical alienness to some other/ out-group' (Brons 2015: 83). When an in-group 'others' an out-group, it is usually through the identification of a desirable characteristic that the in-group has and the out-group lacks. One such characteristic might be rationality. Othering sometimes implies the inferiority of the out-group. In other cases, the other is rendered 'not so much (implicitly) inferior, but *radically alien*' (Brons 2015: 72). Othering can be more or less crude. In crude othering, the out-group is partly defined by reference to its lack of one or more desirable characteristics.

An example of othering is the Orientalist myth of the contrast between the rational and therefore superior West and the irrational and inferior East. In Said's words, Orientalism is 'a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident"' (2003: 2). Its essence is 'the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority' (2003: 42). It is a political vision of reality that promotes the difference between 'the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them")' (2003: 43). The Orientalist attitude was one to which Rudyard Kipling gave expression when he wrote that 'You'll never plumb the Oriental mind' and that 'if you did, it isn't worth the toil' (Kipling 1942: 69).²⁵ The connection between this attitude and false humility in the study of terrorism might not be obvious but is nevertheless

real. It is striking that the varieties of terrorism that are most commonly represented as beyond rational comprehension tend to be of Middle Eastern ('Oriental') rather than European origin. 'Oriental' terrorism is unknowable because it is illogical, irrational and fanatical, and the effect of applying these epithets to an individual or organisation is to emphasise its alienness and inferiority.²⁶

On this account, it is no accident that Western terrorist organisations such as the IRA were rarely said to be irrational or unknowable. Their methods and objectives might have been objectionable but they were hardly ever seen as beyond rational comprehension. The terrorism of the IRA was Occidental rather than Oriental and therefore in the space of reasons. As Jackson notes, groups such as the IRA and ETA 'were considered to be epistemologically predictable – at least in retrospect' (2015: 43) and could therefore be studied without Rumsfeldian humility. To emphasise a special need for such humility in the study of Islam-related terrorism is to imply a lack of predictability that is, in turn, a reflection of a lack of rationality. Emphasising the unpredictability and unknowability of Islam-related terrorism isn't an expression of intellectual humility but a form of othering, rooted in Orientalist stereotypes about the Oriental mind. It is *false* humility because, like Orientalist stereotypes more generally, it has no basis in reality.

As well as being hard to reconcile with what is known about Islam-related terrorism, the othering of some terrorists is also problematic on conceptual grounds. As argued by Donald Davidson, there are conceptual limits to how much irrationality an interpreter can attribute to others while continuing to regard them as thinkers.²⁷ The possibility that individuals like the 9/11 hijackers were incapable of thought has not so far been contemplated even by the most ardent proponents of Rumsfeldian humility. It is also noteworthy that in a speech to Congress just after the 9/11 attacks President Bush asked why 'they' hate 'us' and suggested that the hijackers acted as they did because 'they hate our freedoms', including freedom of religion and

freedom of speech.²⁸ As has often been noted, there is little very evidence for this interpretation. What is more relevant in the present context is that there is no suggestion in the President's remarks that 'we' can't understand 'them', or that it is impossible to know the true motives of the Orientals who hate 'us'. This points to more than a little ambivalence about the extent to which it is possible to plumb the Oriental mind.

The real challenge for policy-makers and political leaders who wish to acknowledge how much is known about terrorism is that doing so may be politically unpalatable. It has been deemed politically unacceptable by many Western governments to admit that their own policies in the Middle East might have bolstered support for terrorist organisations in the region even though the evidence that this is the case is overwhelming. Given the choice between frankly acknowledging what is known about these matters and maintaining the fiction that we cannot understand what terrorists do and why they do it, many Western governments take the second option. In the longer term, however, the consequences of wilful blindness and false humility are problematic. By refusing to engage with the reality of terrorism, governments are less likely to develop effective and realistic counterterrorism strategies. Humility has its place in the study of terrorism but only proper intellectual humility. The remaining question is how such humility should be understood.

4

It should go without saying that proper intellectual humility requires a willingness to acknowledge and own actual limitations and actual gaps in our knowledge of terrorism. By the same token, it requires us to refrain, for political or other reasons, from exaggerating the extent of our ignorance. However, there are other aspect of proper intellectual humility that may be less obvious. One aspect presupposes a distinction between 'generalist' and 'particularist' approaches to terrorism.²⁹ Generalism and particularism are responses to a fundamental question posed by Marc Sageman: what leads people to turn to political violence?³⁰ For the

particularist, there is no general answer to this question because people who turn to political violence are historically specific particulars with their individual trajectories and interactions with different environmental factors. Pathways to terrorism are not unknowable but they are, as Heath-Kelly notes, 'individualised and disconnected' (2017: 300). One person's turn to political violence might be understandable, at least in retrospect, in the light of his biography but what makes his turn to violence intelligible may have little or no bearing on another person's turn to political violence. There is, as Andrew Silke puts it, 'no one path into terrorism' (2003: 34).

Generalists are much more optimistic about providing a general answer to Sageman's question. They are confident that different individuals' pathways to terrorism have enough in common to justify the construction of general theories of how people become terrorists. Judicious abstraction from irrelevant individual differences is a part of all theorising and there is no *a priori* reason to suppose that Sageman's question can't be answered.³¹ So, for example, one particularly influential form of generalism claims that people become terrorists because they have been 'radicalised', that is acquired extremist beliefs and values, usually by interacting with other extremists. Other theories explain the turn to violence by reference to situational factors, or as a 'collectively rational strategic choice' (Crenshaw 2011: 112).³²

The debate between generalism and particularism can't be resolved here. A case has been made elsewhere for a moderate form of particularism that strikes a balance between the particular and the general.³³ Suppose that this is taken as read. The question that then arises is this: to the extent that pathways to terrorism *are* individualised and disconnected, what type of understanding is it possible to achieve of a given individual's turn to violence? Even if there are some things of a general nature that can be said about why *people* make this turn there is still the question why a specific person ended up as a terrorist. For example, many terrorists belong to aggrieved minorities but few members of aggrieved minorities become terrorists. The

question, then, is: ‘why did these particular individuals engage in terrorism when most of their compatriots did not?’ (Silke 2003: 33). This cannot be answered without extensive biographical knowledge of the individuals in question and willingness to engage with their desires and subjectivities. This is the emotionally charged perspective-taking described above. When all goes well it results in a biographical rather than scientific understanding of the terrorist subject. Instead of applying scientific laws to their subjects, biographers try to get into their subjects’ heads in an effort to sense of them.³⁴ To the extent that it is possible to do this with individual terrorists it should be possible to answer Silke’s question.

How realistic is this? This is the point at which issues of intellectual humility come to the fore once again. The discussion so far has been relatively optimistic. In an effort to resist the exaggerated pessimism of the anti-knowledge perspective on terrorism it has been argued above that both the causes and motivations of terrorism are knowable to a considerable extent and that, in general, terrorism is not beyond rational comprehension. Yet it cannot be denied that some forms of terrorism and certain specific acts of terrorism are hard to understand, even with the best will in the world, and a serious effort to achieve a biographical understanding of their perpetrators. *Some* acts of terrorism come close to defying rational comprehension even if the majority do not.

This difficulty can be illustrated by Tarak Barkawi’s comment that ‘we need to find the requisite empathy to understand why men dedicated to the betterment of their peoples and willing to sacrifice their lives, found it necessary to fly jet aircraft into buildings’ (2004: 37). Even if one sets aside moral qualms about empathising with the 9/11 hijackers, or doubts about the idea that ‘the betterment of their peoples’ was their objective, the difficulty is that it is extraordinarily difficult *in this case* to achieve the understanding that Barkawi describes. Whatever the grievances and personal histories of Mohammed Atta and his fellow 9/11 terrorists, it is almost literally beyond comprehension that they did what they did in pursuit of

their objectives. In this case, it is not Orientalism that makes ‘othering’ inevitable, but the nature of the act. The same might be said about the actions of ISIS. There sometimes comes a point at which intellectual humility requires the frank admission that we cannot understand. However, the existence of such extreme cases should not blind us to the extent to which terrorism in its less pathological forms is not beyond rational comprehension.³⁵

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¹ Rumsfeld 2011, Author's Note.

² This is not Stampnitzky's own view but rather a description of what she sees as the root of the politics of anti-knowledge.

³ For a defence of this claim, see not only Zulaika 2012 but also Ilardi 2004, Jackson 2015 and Cassam 2018.

⁴ Crenshaw herself is highly critical of the distinction between 'old' and 'new' terrorism. See below.

⁵ For an account of wilful ignorance in terrorism studies see Jackson 2015.

⁶ Can one be said to 'own' a gap in one's knowledge if one has no desire to fill it? Yes, if one regards the gap as desirable, or at least not undesirable. Whitcomb et al. assume that one must take one's limitations to be problematic but this is not always the case. See below for more on this.

⁷ For Jackson, unknown knowns are examples of what he calls 'subjugated knowledge', that is, knowledge which is 'wilfully ignored or suppressed' (2015: 35).

⁸ Said 2003. On 'othering', see below and Brons 2015.

⁹ Or, as Stampnitzky puts it, it is 'an active refusal of explanation itself' (2013: 187).

¹⁰ Dershowitz is not a lone voice on this side of the argument. Jones and Smith also object to focusing on the root causes of terrorism. As they see it, 'casting terrorism in terms of root causes determines it in a form that both reduces its significance and explains it away' (2006: 1085).

¹¹ On the role of empathy in engaging with another person's subjectivity see Cassam 2018. Engaging with another person's subjectivity can be more or less demanding. In its least demanding form, it might simply be a matter of listening to what they have to say. Yet, as Jackson notes, 'with only a few notable exceptions, little effort has been made by terrorism experts and officials to try and understand terrorist motivations by listening to their own words

and messages' (2015: 45). Jackson attributes this to the counterterrorist's passion for ignorance. This is especially noticeable in relation to Al-Qaeda, where Osama bin Laden's voice remained largely unheard by Western audiences despite 'a vast corpus of open letters, interviews, propaganda videos and statements' (Jackson 2015: 45). See also Ilardi 2004.

¹² Or, as Zulaika and Douglass put it, 'Terrorists are kooks, crazies, demented, or at best misguided. Contact with them is polluting; dialogue is pointless since terrorists are, by definition, outside the pale of reason' (1996: x). This might sound like a parody but fits a number of remarks in Lacqueur 1999. See, for example, Lacqueur 1999: 230-1.

¹³ This list is from Whitcomb et al. 2015: 516.

¹⁴ One's desire not to know may or may not be conscious. It is more straightforward to think of a person's ignorance as wilful when the desire not to know is conscious.

¹⁵ Even this might be disputed since what one sees as an insuperable cognitive obstacle might be no such thing.

¹⁶ Crenshaw also makes this point. See Crenshaw 2011: 57.

¹⁷ See Sluka 2011: 73 and Zulaika 2012: 54-6.

¹⁸ Sluka 2011.

¹⁹ English 2009: 52.

²⁰ As Crenshaw puts it, 'a regime thus encourages terrorism when it creates martyrs to be avenged' (2011: 47).

²¹ Sageman 2004.

²² This was the President's Daily Brief dated 6 August 2001. The title of the brief was 'Bin Ladin (sic) Determined to Strike in U.S'.

²³ As reported in July 2001 by an FBI agent based in Phoenix. The so-called 'Phoenix memo' was extensively discussed after 9/11.

²⁴ For a compelling account of all this see Bamford 2005 and Suskind 2007.

²⁵ These words are from Kipling's poem 'One Viceroy Resigns'.

²⁶ On the idea of the 'terrorist Other', see Zulaika and Douglass 1996: x. They argue that 'it is one of the tenets of counterterrorism that any interaction with the terrorist Other is violation of a taboo'.

²⁷ Davidson 2001.

²⁸ A full transcript of the speech is available via: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html

²⁹ This distinction is explained in Cassam 2018.

³⁰ See Sageman 2017: ix. Not all political violence is terrorism. For present purposes this can be ignored.

³¹ Silke claims that 'after nearly four decades of research it is now appreciated that there are a number of relatively common factors in the backgrounds of terrorists' (2003: 34).

³² These varieties of generalism are further analysed in Cassam, forthcoming.

³³ See the exposition and defence of 'Moderate Epistemic Particularism' in Cassam 2018.

³⁴ For some interesting reflections on the nature of biographical understanding see chapter 1 of Holmes 2017. Holmes describes biography as 'a simple act of complex friendship' (2017: 17). This would explain the reluctance of terrorism researchers to seek a biographical understanding of terrorists.

³⁵ I thank Alessandra Tanesini for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.