



## **HOW DEHUMANIZATION OF TERRORISTS REFLECTS ON THE INEFFABILITY OF AL-QAEDA PHENOMENON: a philosophical Investigation**

Primavera Fisogni\*

### **Abstract**

Ten years after September 11, terrorism is still an open question for philosophy: the difficulty to define it remains a challenging issue, since Derrida has underlined the relation between the invisibility and the ineffability of the phenomenon. I'll argue that this intuition is plausible, at least from a phenomenological and metaphysical perspective, but my aim is to move further. In the first part of the paper I'll show that terrorists, by assuming the negative ideology of Al Qaeda network, lose something of their personal being; this lack is at the root of their evil-doing and originates disordered, unlimited actions. My inquiry moves from the concept of sensing explored by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae* (Quaestio 15; Ia-IIae Pars), as the ingredient of willing, an act that inclines and orients one's conduct. When a terrorist takes voluntary the distance from the world of life, by joining the subversive group, the process of dehumanization begins. It has nothing to do with a brainwashing, but the symptom of an extreme ordinariness has something in common with the void experimented by people affected by mental diseases: in both cases this intimate dryness comes from a distorted relation with the world of life, voluntary in the case of evil-doers, not deliberately chosen, on the other hand. If we accept these premises, we conclude that something really gets lost in the process of deliberate dehumanization. In conclusion: terrorism is a main task to come to term with the ineffable not because of the incapacity of the mind to think of it (as Derrida argued or as it happens in the experiences of time and suffering, for instance) but because of the impoverishment of the personal Self of the evil-doers that reflects on the phenomenon in itself. On a logical ground, we face a

---

\* Ph.D. Catholic University of Milan. E – mail: [vera.fisogni@tiscali.it](mailto:vera.fisogni@tiscali.it)

state of knowledge that cannot be put into words because it does not have a content. The real lack of reality showed by terrorism restores the classical notion of evil as deprivation.

**Key Words:** Al-Qaeda, Thomas Aquinas, Sense, terrorism.

**JEL:** N33

**COMMENT LA DESHUMANISATION DES TERRORISTES SE REFLÈTE  
SUR LE CARACTÈRE INEFFABLE DU PHÉNOMÈNE D'AL QAEDA: une  
recherche philosophique**

**Résumé**

Dix ans après le 11 septembre, le terrorisme reste une question ouverte à la philosophie: la difficulté pour le définir est un thème qui pose un défi, puisque Derrida a souligné la relation entre l'invisibilité et l'indicibilité du phénomène. Mon argumentation est que son intuition est plausible, au moins dans une perspective phénoménologique et métaphysique, mais mon but est d'aller plus loin. Dans la première partie de l'article, je vais montrer que les terroristes en adoptant l'idéologie négative du réseau Al Qaida, perdent quelque chose de leur essence humaine; cette perte est le point de départ de leurs actions répréhensibles et est à l'origine de leurs actions chaotiques et effrénées. Mon analyse part du concept de *perception* exploré par Thomas d'Aquin dans sa *Summa Theologiae* (Quaestio 15; la *Ilae* pars) en tant qu'élément volontariste qui oriente la conduite individuelle. Quand un terroriste prend volontairement ses distances du monde quotidien pour rejoindre un groupe subversif, le processus de deshumanisation débute. Cela n'a rien à voir avec un lavage de cerveau, mais le symptôme d'une *extrême normalité* a quelque chose de semblable au *vide* expérimenté par les gens frappés de désordres mentaux: dans les deux cas, la sécheresse intime provient de la perversion des rapports avec la vie quotidienne, volontairement dans le cas de malfaiteurs, involontairement, sinon. Si nous acceptons ce point de départ, nous concluons que quelque chose a vraiment été perdu au cours du processus de deshumanisation délibérée. En conclusion: le terrorisme entre principalement dans le domaine de l'ineffable, non pas à cause de l'incapacité de l'esprit à le conceptualiser (comme l'a argumenté Derrida ou comme cela arrive, par exemple, dans les expériences impliquant les facteurs temps et souffrance), mais à cause de l'appauvrissement du Moi des délinquants qui désacréte le phénomène en tant que tel. Logiquement, nous nous trouvons face à un corpus de connaissances qui ne peut pas être transcrit en mots, car il n'a pas de contenu. Le *vrai manque* de réalité dont témoigne le terrorisme restaure la notion classique de mal comme privation.

**Mots clé:** Al Qaeda, Thomas d'Aquin, perception, terrorisme.

**I. Islamic terrorism: a theoretically challenging issue**

Shortly after the World Trade Centre collapsed in New York, philosopher Jacques Derrida, interviewed by Giovanna Borradori claimed that terrorism cannot be thought nor said (Borradori, 2003). It cannot be identified nor nominate. Ten years later, Islamic terrorism is a still open question, especially on the philosophical ground, because all the

efforts of sketching a valuable definition of the terrorist threat haven't provided the expected results. Among international scholars is given a consensus (Dozier, 2002) definition that, nevertheless, is unable to answer the question why ordinary persons – generally without criminal reports – kill innocent people without any other reason than the hate in it-self. The very intuition of Derrida is to be taken seriously in consideration, in order to get to the very heart of the subversive action.

In this conceptual paper we argue that terrorism *cannot be said* because it *cannot be seen*: the conceptual limit of any discourse about it is strictly related to the dehumanization of the evildoers. Precisely: terrorists are affected by a loss of being that reverberates on the phenomenon itself. In order to prove the phenomenological intuition, I'll briefly investigate the human condition of terrorists, on a phenomenological and metaphysical ground. We will discuss the link between *ordinariness* of Islamic terrorists (§ I; II) and the *blurring definition* of terrorism (§ III; IV). Moving from my previous investigations (Fisogni, 2004; 2009; 2010 a; 2010 b), my aim is to clarify the process in which the internal void comes to surface. In order to embark upon this task, I shall have to move further sociological and political accounts by clarifying the peculiar human condition of the evildoers. The problem of this essay, then is: can intimate dryness be communicated at the whole phenomenon of terrorism? I'll divide my paper into several sections that, by moving from Al Qaeda case, may lead to the suggestion of a theoretical perspective about evildoing.

### **I.1 Ordinariness of terrorists**

The first step to thread the discussion on a secure ground is to direct our attention inward. It is generally known that Al Qaeda members are, in mostly of the cases, people living an ordinary life<sup>1</sup>: Mohamed Atta, Bin Laden's ringleader for the death pilots of September 11 was a brilliant student and a lovely son for his father<sup>2</sup>, he never has made visible any symptom of his affiliation to Al Qaeda before the major event that shattered the world. After the bombers attacked the London metro, in 2005, in their efforts to sketch a personality profile of a typical suicide bomber, police investigators faced only persons without a criminal background. "None of them, in fact, had a criminal record – noticed *The New Scientist* -. None was mentally ill, none was especially poor, and they were mostly well educated". Michael Hoffman, author of *Inside Terrorism* wrote in his preface that he was always dumbstruck by "how disturbingly 'normal' most terrorists seem". Mohamed Atta and the ones who piloted the airlines that crashed into the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon belonged, in fact, "to a new breed of terrorists: intelligent, middle-class men committing mass murder and suicide united only by Islamic extremism and hatred for the West". A question arises at this point of the investigation. Is there a link between ordinariness and evildoing?

The notion of ordinariness that we are going to take in consideration in this paper is quite different from the classical ones expressed by Arendt and by Bauman, who focused

---

<sup>1</sup> This is the more common profile that comes out from the biographies of the recognized Al Qaeda members. However, a certain number of terrorists are poor people who wants to redeem themselves in the radical effort of the so called jihad.

<sup>2</sup> "My son was a very sensitive man", witness quoted in T. Dermott, *Perfect Soldiers: the Hijackers. Who they are. Why they Did it*, New York: Harpers Collins, 2005, p. 19.

the origin of ordinariness outside the person, in the logic of an ideology. Precisely, the author of *The Origin of Totalitarianism* has sketched a theory of ordinariness as a consequence of bureaucracy. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the classical report on “banality of evil”, she wrote that “the essence of totalitarian government (...) is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the machinery out of the men, and thus to dehumanize them” (Bauman, 1989: 21). This idea has been investigated by Bauman (1989) and others (Schnapper, 2010), who went also further Arendt’s thought, by asserting that “the routine processes produce dehumanization”. Such a procedure is given in two steps: 1) violence must be authorized; 2) victims must be considered not human beings, but something like “objects”. Persons seem unable to express their will. In other words, they appear to have been brainwashed: robots, not human beings. At the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, in 1961, judges couldn’t believe that “an average, ‘normal’ person, neither feeble-minded non indoctrinated nor simple, could be perfectly incapable of telling right from wrong” (Arendt, 1965: 26).

## **I. 2 Ordinariness of terrorists as a loss of being: the role of sensing in a human act**

The anthropological condition that we are going to explore – the phenomenological and metaphysical notion of ordinariness, which fits to Islamic terrorism – might be said a peculiar kind of dehumanization strictly depending on the loss of sensing<sup>3</sup>. Ideology plays a major role in it and is at the origin of the self impoverishment, but my aim is to integrate Arendt’s and Bauman’s perspective. Precisely, I hold that is not the content of a main idea – the so called “positive” (from the Latin *positum*, given) side of an ideology – orients a human subject to evildoing, by limiting his/her willing and sensing function. What we assume is that ideology, the logic of an idea in the Arendt’s sense, always refers to a denial: whatever does not belong to the ideological content is considered not valuable, not meaningful, not interesting. I call this dark side of the ideology the *negative* component of it. It may happen, in specific circumstances, that the denial prevails on the positive aspects of ideology: it follows that nothing makes sense, except the effort to deny, cancel and destroy what is outside of it. Little by little this attitude becomes stronger, so that it seems to prevail on the native ideological content. It is hypothesized that this process is a peculiar trait of terrorism, particularly of Al Qaeda terrorism and is clearly revealed - on a descriptive ground - by Bin Laden’s and Al Zawahiri’s speeches. In the early Nineties of the past century, Al Qaeda main political intent was to restore the Caliphate, the *age d’or* of the Islamic community (or *umma*). However, this aim is completely disappeared after 1996, leaving the ground to an increasing hate towards the USA and the Western civilization at large<sup>4</sup>.

Nevertheless, ideologies sometimes support ideas of justice and of redistribution of goods between rich and poor people: the stories of Al Qaeda members like the one of Mohamed Atta have shown that, in mostly of the cases, terrorists have joined the

---

<sup>3</sup> It is important to point out that sensing is an experience far more complex than perception: it inclines to reality and allows to grasp the very essence of it. See Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, *Quaestio 15 – De Consensu*.

<sup>4</sup> Osama Bin Laden, “*Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places*”, in *al-Quds al-Arabi*, London, 23 august. In: [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/fatwa\\_1996.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/fatwa_1996.html)

subversive group moved by idealistic reasons (Cloud, 2001). To summarize: the September 11 attacks were not put in effect in the name of an ideology proclaiming the superiority of the Caliphate (the positive content). Atta and his companions were moved by a more general hate towards the world of life in which indifference played a major role. To kill an innocent victim or thousands of them didn't make any difference, in their destructive inclination. The discussion leads us to raise a question: how is possible to move from fundamentalism to terrorism? The denial of whatever does not refer to the "main idea" of ideology – in fact – does not thread on the same ground of killing of innocent people. However, before dealing with this point, let me briefly sketch the role of sensing in the making of a human act.

Sensing is a key concept for philosophy. It does not refer to the mere perception – a psychological issue – but it expresses something more essential in the dynamic of the will. In Thomas Aquinas *Quaestio 15* of the Ia-IIae Pars of the *Summa Theologiae* (*De Consensu-On Consent*) sensing is the act of a peculiar relation to the *res* (the thing) and reality: it plays a relevant role in the human conduct, as a main ingredient of ethics. Why? Sensing does not pick up values, as contemporary phenomenology claims<sup>5</sup>, nor can be seen as the "simple" act of experiencing of the concrete. In the thomistic realistic view it gives the human subject a veritable taste of the thing in itself and allows a subject to find the means in order to get to the final end (Gendling, 1997). If we assume this premise, we can understand why the lack of sensing originates bad and wrong actions, as they were affected by a sort of pathology: one can act, but in no way the person is fully given as a willing subject; the act becomes poor and the Self appears to be impoverished. When willing is separated from sensing, the so called phenomenon of the "cold passion" (*passioni fredde*) is given (Escobar, 2001). The behaviour of Nazi leaders, from Hitler to Eichmann, as well as the terrorist attack to the Twin Towers are vivid examples of this intuition.

Little by little, terrorists loose the contact with reality and their attitude of *sensing* every day life. It is not a sort of attitude to the world. Phenomenology of person, as was explored by Munich and Gottingen philosophers from XIX to XX century<sup>6</sup>, it has thrown a light about the role of sensing (*fühlen*) in the discovering of values and in the possibility to orient one's conduct. Without the development of such a view it is really hard to understand the relation between one's Self and the outer world and other theoretical efforts to explore the link existing between the human subject and the space: I'm thinking of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and Romano Guardini, for instance. Without taking in consideration nature and role of sensing in a human act, it would be impossible to give an adequate account of what has happened inside the terrorist's Self.

At this point of the paper, we get the first result. The intuition that dehumanization – in islamic terrorists – is strictly related with the internal dryness is now based on a set of anthropological/metaphysical arguments: if a person looses the contact with reality – in this case for the self deliberation to join the subversive group – an intimate impoverishment is given. Nevertheless, in order to found this achievement on a more solid ground, we have to

---

<sup>5</sup> This idea has been explored by phenomenology, from Max Scheler to the more recent studies of Roberta De Monticelli.

<sup>6</sup> I mainly refers to Max Scheler, Edith Stein, Dietrich von Hildebrand.

give a rapid, but complete picture of another relevant phenomenon in which the loss of sensing originates a loss of the person herself.

## **II. From fundamentalism to terrorism. The negative role of ideology Ordinariness as an intimate dryness at the origin of evil-doing**

We wouldn't understand why people move from fundamentalism to terrorism if we wouldn't take in consideration how deeply Al Qaeda's negative ideology works on the loss of sensing. I refer to the terrorist groups in which the denial of any sense and value takes the place of the Self. It is a complex process, both anthropological and metaphysical, that cannot be compared with the so called brainwashing and has been deeply investigated, on a psychological level, by Marc Sageman. As was noticed before, Islamic terrorists take voluntarily the distance from the world of life assuming the negative ideology of Al Qaeda and joining the terror network. Being part of a subversive group, as it happens in Al Qaeda, is a condition that reinforces the closure to the world of life. The thick society where terrorists are indoctrinated is the very heart of their dehumanization. Precisely the process is at the origin of the terrorists' deprivation of sensing. It moves from the idea that nothing really is worth except the denial of the world, as it is declared by Al Qaeda ideology:

*“the virulent rejection of society finds home in the doctrine of takfir or excommunication of society”. As Sageman wrote: “In group-love combined with out-group hate, under this violent and extreme ideology, is a strong incentive for committing mass murder and suicide (...). Their sacrifice is grounded in group dynamics”*(Sageman, 2004: 130-131).

Terrorist's dehumanization deals both with their identity and action. Three main steps are given:

1) Uniform identity takes the place of individual identity. In the terrorist group there is no room for a veritable interpersonal relation. Here the moral disorientation begins.

2) The second issue concerns indifference towards the world of life and reality in general. The only real world, for terrorists, is the subversive group, in which uniform identity becomes stronger and feeds a progressive and unlimited hate. At this level is given an ontological loss: the weakening of the experience of good.

3) Nothing makes sense, except the subversive group and the extreme ideology that grounds it. The world of terrorists, considered as a source of sense and value, is not yet the world of life, but the subversive action itself.

To move from the third to the fourth issue, we have to consider the relation between self and will. Identity is, properly speaking, a component of the will and an essential ingredient of self determination. As Spanish philosopher Clavell wrote:

*“without me it can't be any good for me”*(Clavell, 2002: 109).

On a classical metaphysical ground – we especially refer to Thomas Aquinas whom investigation on the human person are still fruitful and valuable – identity is involved with will because it participates to incline human act to things. Terrorists, I've argued in my doctoral dissertation (Fisogni, 2009), suffer from a weakened identity that reverberates on

human being's natural tension to good. What are the consequences on acting? Here is the forth issue.

4) Two are the corollary effects of a weakened identity on human act. The first problem is in the order of the inclination (Aquinas would have said: *inclinatio*) to the good; the second refers to the instruments that direct will to the end (in the Thomist language: *intentio*). A weakened and disordered intentionality, not correctly oriented to the end, will produce acts with some defect: we are talking about an action not well directed and, consequently, badly performed. This action may be called "disordered".

It can be performed, of course, but "*praetermittendo ordinem*" ("order has been left out of consideration") (Cardona, 1997). And because order is the measure of music (Augustinus)<sup>7</sup>, this condition can be called also "dissonance" of acting, where the term dissonance is used by Aquinas as synonymous of disorder. If a person, in this case a terrorist, does not sense reality, as a consequence of the denial of its sense and value, also the tension to the final end is weakened. From a metaphysical point of view, it explicates why terrorists actions are disordered (lack of intentionality) and unlimited (when no difference is perceived, to kill thousands of people does not make problem at all). A main consequence of the lack of sensing in a human act is indifference. In the language of philosophical tradition, indifference is a condition that comes before the decision and the moral judgment about the action performed: it exists only before making an act. When someone makes a choice, on the contrary, there's absolutely no place for indifference. Terrorists weaken their identity in consequence of both 1) assuming the negative ideology of Al Qaeda and 2) joining the hate-groups in which the subversive process is planned. We will take briefly in consideration the case of mental illness, in a phenomenological perspective.

### III. The loss of sensing: the experience of void

In this paragraph I wish to stress the anthropological similarity between islamic terrorists and people suffering from mental diseases. I don't want to say that Al Qaeda members are insane: on the contrary, there is a wide consensus, among scholars, about the fact that terrorists are not mentally ill. Nancy Hartvelt Kobrin argues that islamic terrorists reveal (Kobrin, 2009) a "schizoid character type"<sup>8</sup>. The act of willing, in terrorism, plays a crucial role. Al Qaeda agents deliberate to enter the subversive group and they perfectly know the process of their criminal agency. Differently from the Nazi SS, who generally knew only their specific task, Al Qaeda members have a complete view of their involvement. They accept, from the beginning, the possibility to kill themselves in action and becoming martyrs of Islam. At this point of the discussion, let me say something about the connection and the distinction between terrorism and mental disease.

---

<sup>7</sup> See Augustinus, *De Musica*.

<sup>8</sup> According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) a person is said to have "schizoid" personality disorders when she/he exhibits pervasive detachment from and disinterest in social relationships. I express some criticism against the psychiatric interpretation of Al Qaeda members: my argument, from a philosophical point of view, is that they live an ordinary life, they work, they spend holidays with their families, and so on. They are not said "schizoid" until they are recognized, *a posteriori*, terrorists.

If something in common is given (and asks to be carefully investigated) – to people with mental diseases and terrorists – is the distorted relation to the world of life. Psychiatrist and phenomenologist Ludwig Binswanger (1960) held that the more serious diseases are the consequence of the lost of transcendence: in schizophrenia, for example, a person is unable to recognize herself/himself as a subject; as a consequence of it, it cannot perceived any distinction between I and It; a human subject, when suffers from a serious mental disease, cannot properly makes a distinction between herself/himself and the other things. He/She becomes – as Binswanger wrote – “a thing among other thing”. This human condition is revealed by a variety of symptoms, especially by the experience of void, common to a great number of mental pathologies, from depressive states to schizophrenia.

The void in psychosis may be said an intimate dryness, that does not allow a person to orient in the world of life and deliberate about his/her own existence. This rapid picture of the phenomenon of the loss of sensing in serious mental diseases allows us to come back to the investigation about ordinariness of Islamic terrorism. What have we achieved? I hold that the experience of void has something in common with ordinariness of Al Qaeda activists: 1) they both belongs from the incorrect relation to the world, voluntary in the case of terrorism, not deliberately chosen in the one of people with mental illness; 2) they both reveal an impoverishment in the acts of willing, sensing, relating with other people.

### **III.1 Is it possible to communicate the intimate dryness?**

The main aim of this paper is to explore the ineffability of terrorism, whose consequence is the difficulty to a valuable definition of the phenomenon. In order to prove the phenomenological intuition that the ordinariness of terrorists reflects on the understanding of terrorism, I need a further step. Precisely, I have to show that the intimate dryness of the human person can be expressed and perceived as such.

We briefly come back to the condition of people with mental diseases. One of the main difficulties in making a discourse with a schizophrenic is that he/she seems to live in a world apart. His/her sight is often disoriented. It is really hard to make a conversation. Relatives and friends of a mentally ill person perfectly know how frustrating is to enter in his/her world: his/her eyes look at us, but they generally don't see anything familiar. At the same time, it is hard to recognize – in the glance of the patient – the man or the woman he/she was once a time. The same happens with people affected by those serious neurological diseases which damage memory and other cognitive functions. What I mean is that the experience of void – when it is the consequence of an existential state, such as a disease – can be expressed by a subject and can be perceived by the other who is in relation. The cognitive experience of a void, what does it means? The situations presented above communicate a sense of frustration, a sort of absence: the person we knew is in front of us, we face a completely different subject. At the same time, the other person is unable to express himself/herself fully. In both cases something has gone lost, in the concrete experience of the other.

We should resist any generalizations at this point. However, the cases presented above confirm the relation between the intimate dryness – the impossibility for a person to realize her fulfilment – and the communicative deficit related to it. I suggest that the same

happens when we try to focus on Islamic terrorism: the ineffability underlined by Derrida seems, at that point of the paper, at least plausible. The Wittgenstein's idea that some things cannot be put into words may apply to Al Qaeda phenomenon (Wittgenstein, 1998). The German philosopher's claim mainly refers to the moral domain, particularly to the moral utterances. Indeed, there are other phenomena – I turn to the experience of suffering or to the temporality – that can be said ineffable. The specific point I want to reflect on here is expressed by the following question: may we compare terrorism with other phenomena characterized by any conceptual limit? Time and suffering, just to quote two of these cases, are hard to define: the knowledge of temporality, as Augustine underlines in his masterpiece (*Confessiones*) is intuitive more than theoretical; the same is for the experience of pain, whose meaning seems to escape every effort to conceptualize.

Although their ineffability, these two phenomena are in no way comparable with terrorism. In fact, time and suffering present a strong experiential knowledge, that prevails on the rational understanding. Terrorism does not belong to this field. We do not make experience of it in the same way of time and suffering. On Jean-Luc Marion's metaphysical perspective, we could talk about them as "saturated phenomena" (*phénomènes saturés* (Marion, 2005): the difficulty to make any concept of them is because intention (roughly speaking: the giving of the phenomenon to one's mind) is stronger than intuition (the capacity of thinking). On the contrary, the frustration provided by the efforts of relating with people affected with mental diseases is the consequence of an absence. We don't see *something essential* of the person when we experiment the sense of disorientation. It seems the case of the Al Qaeda members. Their "ordinariness" brings to surface a weakened identity, an intimate dryness by the subversive ideology.

### **Suggestion of a relation between ordinariness and the blurring definition of the phenomenon**

We want to come back to ineffability again. I've conceded that ineffability may be said a feature of certain states of knowledge (time; suffering) and because of this, an intrinsic limit of the mind. Nevertheless, from a phenomenological ground, terrorists attest a sort of self-deprivation that can be taken a symptom of the difficulty to sketch the personal profile. So, what I'm going to argue is that the difficulty of make a concept about terrorism belongs to a *real* impoverishment. Dehumanization refers to the loss of a *component* of something constitutive of the human being. Conceptual philosopher A. M. Moore (2000) notices the relation between concept, content and truth:

"The claim that things are ineffable is to be understood as the claim that some state of knowledge cannot be put into words, or more strictly, that some state of knowledge do not have any content (and therefore do not share any content with any truth)" (Moore, 2000: 367).

What the phenomenon of terrorism brings to surface is properly the link between *ineffable* and *invisible*. It cannot be said what cannot be seen: we come back to the theoretical intuition of Derrida from this paper moved, but we do it on a solid set of arguments. On a logical ground, we are just reaching the Aristotle's distinction between

name (*ònoma*) and definition (*lògos orismòs*): from the very essence of a name (*tode ti*) derives also the possibility to say the same thing in a different way, as a definition. If there is not any adequate capacity to grasp this “first ontological” content, it becomes hard to express the name, before giving a definition. If we turn to the case of terrorism, it basically means that it is impossible to say who a terrorist is, since the name “terrorist” cannot be thought. Derrida, while recognize the ineffability of terrorism, provides us of a path to solve the difficulty. From a logical point of view, the limit of a definition of terrorism seems to be related to the intimate dryness that reflects on the emerging structure (*struttura emergente* (Conni, 2005) of the phenomenon. Do we face something similar also on a phenomenological ground, not only on a logical level? Yes, we do, I argue.

The use of metaphors, in the discourse about islamic terrorism and terrorists is highly revealing of the difficulty to make a concept of something that escape the representation: it is something that *is for* a something else. It is interesting to note that utterances referring the domain of invisibility are often used to talk about terrorism. “Phenomenon without face” is a recurrent statement in order to define it. Al Qaeda leader Bin Laden has not yet captured: he is a sort of phantom, a “mystery” for the intelligence agency all over the world. Terrorists are generally said – “terrorists of the next door” – to underline how ordinary was, in mostly of the cases, their life. A theoretical effort to move further the blurring definition of the subversive phenomenon was done in 2005, after the attack in the London metro, when newspapers and televisions defined terrorists as *bombers*. I would say that *bomber* allows people to make a *representation* of the criminal persons as subjects responsible of a peculiar act, the one of leaving bombs in the underground. Bombers are “visible”, differently from terrorists, a generic and blurring term. Generally speaking, ten years after September 11, the subject matter (terrorism) is referred to by a sentence that does not literally describe it; it is vehicle of understanding of something (the phenomenon of terrorism) with a negation (no face; absent face; ordinary people=it is hard to make a sharp distinction from criminal subjects).

On a phenomenological perspective the use of the language is highly revealing of an inner deficiency of the thing itself. A deficiency of *sense* that, on a metaphysical level – as I argued in the previous paragraph – is a deficiency of *content*, a limit that belongs to the “knowledge that” more than the “knowledge how” (Moore, 378p). To precise the relation between concept and content, is a crucial passage in the discussion. In fact, the intimate dryness at the origin of the impoverishment of the Self really reflects on the whole person – the willing, thinking, acting subject. The dehumanization that follows the loose of sensing, provided by the negative component of ideology, reduces the possibility to be human beings.

A question arises at this point of the discussion. How is possible to say that Islamic terrorism *is invisible*, since it deals with major events like September 11? We *saw* the jets crushing against the Twin Towers; it was a fact. From a descriptive point of view we recognize a more general failure when we deal with such a phenomenon: it seems impossible, for philosophy, to come to terms with the ineffability of terrorism. On the contrary, if we examine 9/11 from another perspective, we cannot help considering what a great nonsense was that attack: thousands of the victims died and they all were innocent; it

seemed a war attack, but no war have ever been proclaimed; Bin Laden said it was a religious jihad, but the attack was condemned by Muslim religious leaders as an act that hurt the Islamic community as well. An apparent paradox is given. We face violence at its highest rate of visibility and, at the same time, we are forced to recognize the impossibility to make any sense of it.

#### **IV. Restoring the concept of evil as deprivation**

Defining terrorism is a main task to come to terms with the ineffable. We have certainly explored whether the difficulty to reflect about terrorism – as it happens, for instance, when we refer to the concept of time – depends on the incapacity of the mind to think of it or to the intimate deprivation of personal Self. I consider the second possibility more than plausible, moving from the metaphysics of the human act. My argument is that terrorist's lack of human consistence: when a person deliberately joins Al Qaeda and becomes member of subversive groups, he/she loses, little by little, the contact with the world of life. This condition reflects on the incapacity of sensing. Not the ideological content, but the ideological denial of whatever does not belong to the terrorist's aim is at the origin of the dehumanization of evildoers.

It basically means that a terrorist is a human subject unable to perceive reality, as he/she lived in a world apart. Because of their negative ideology that reduces the link to any sense and value of the human experience, Islamic terrorists have reduced their possibilities and functions as willing/thinking subjects: the only sense of their lives consists of the myth of acting and the suicide in action. If we carefully consider it, it cannot be said a *content* – something consistent – but a deprivation. Secondly terrorism is not the only phenomenon that reveals an inner deficiency of its members. Sensing is a crucial component of willing because it inclines to the things themselves and, because of this movement, it orients to action. We wouldn't understand why willing brings about a change in our life if we wouldn't take in consideration this dynamic. It is rather evident that the intimate dryness experienced by terrorists provides some defects to their acts, disorder, unlimited.

#### **Conclusion**

After further examination, if we compare terrorists' experience to the one experimented by people with mental diseases, we realize how similar are the symptoms of void and the "invisibility" of the terrorism. Derrida's valuable insight about the link between ineffability and invisibility after September 11 sounds – 10 years later – at least prophetic. We conclude that terrorists suffer from an intimate inconsistency that is strictly connected with (to) a *real lack* of reality. Defining terrorism, in other words, is a question for metaphysics. To say that it is impossible to give an adequate account of what terrorism means that it is hard to make a relation between the phenomenon and the concept our minds makes of it. The phenomenological theory of sensing in dialogue with the classical metaphysics of the human act may found, on a theoretical ground, the link between the human deficiency of evildoers and the logical limits of making sense of terrorism. In this perspective I do assume that Al Qaeda is a case study for a deeper investigation in the very essence of evil. Precisely it restores the classical notion of evil as deprivation.

## References

- Aquinas, T(1985). *Summa Theologiae*, Bologna: Edizion Studio Domenicano.
- Arendt, H(1965) *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Viking Press.
- Bauman, Z (1989)*Modernity and the Holocaust*, Oxford: Polity Press.
- Binswanger, L. (1960) *Phänomenologische Studien*, Pfullingen: Verlag G. Neske.
- Bin Laden, O (1996) “*Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Place*”s, in *al-Quds al-Arabi*, London, 23 august. In: [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/fatwa\\_1996.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/fatwa_1996.html)
- Borradori, G. (2003)*Filosofia del terrore*, Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- Cardona, C. (1997)*Metafisica del bene e del male*, Milano: Ares.
- Conni, C (2005)*La struttura emergente*, Milano: Bompiani.
- Dozier, R. W(2002) *Why We Hate. Understanding, Curbing and Eliminating Hate in Ourselves and Our World*, Chicago: Contemporary Books.
- Escobar, R (2001)*Il silenzio dei persecutori, ovvero il coraggio di Shahrzad*, Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Fisogni, P. (2004) *Terroristi. La persona nell'agire eversivo*, Roma: Armando.
- Fisogni, P (2006) *Terrorismo. Aspetti filosofici e antropologici*, Nuova Enciclopedia Filosofica; Milano: Bompiani.
- Fisogni, P (2009) *L'inaridimento della persona nell'agire eversivo*, Tesi di dottorato, Collana Dissertationes, Roma: Edusc.
- Fisogni, P (2010 a) “*Terrorists: analogies and differences with mental diseases. A phenomenological-metaphysical perspectives*”, in *Rivista di psichiatria*, III (maggio/giugno), pagg. 145-154.
- Fisogni, P (2010 b) “*Terroristi e fede*”, *Vita Pastorale*, 10, pp. 98-100.
- Gendlin, E (1997) *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning. A Philosophical and Psychological Approach to the Subjective*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press,1997.

Fisogni, P.

Kobrin, H. N (2010) *The Banality of Suicide Terrorism. The Naked Truth About the Psychology of Islamic Suicide Bombing*, Washington: Potomac Books.

Marion, JL (2005) *Etant donné*, Paris: Puf.

Moore, A. w. (2000), “Arguing with Derrida”, in *Ratio*, Vol. XIII, December 2000.

Sageman, M (2004) *Understanding Terror Networks*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Schnapper, D (2004) “*Cultural Relativism: Human Meaning and Limits*”, in *Truth in Science, the Humanities and Religion*, Springer: Dordrecht.

Wittgenstein, L (1998) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus e Quaderni 1914-1916*, Torino: Einaudi.