

## Terrorists: analogies and differences with mental diseases. A phenomenological-metaphysical perspective

*Terroristi: analogie e differenze con la malattia mentale.  
Una prospettiva fenomenologica-metafisica*

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**SUMMARY.** Are islamic terrorists insane? International scholars generally concede that Al Qaeda members are not mentally ill. But, until now, there has not been a shared consensus and a strong argument that can prove it. This paper intends to throw light on the specific dehumanization of terrorists and to show that they are always responsible for their acts, unlike those who are affected by mental diseases. The members of Al Qaeda deny the world of life and take the distance from its sense and value: in their perspective only subversive action makes sense. However they always maintain a transcendent relation with the world (I-you; I-it). Persons with serious mental diseases have generally lost the sense of their self and the transcendence with the world. Terrorists and people with mental illness share a common separation from the world of life: one is voluntary, the other is the consequence of a number of factors (biological, social, etc.). Terrorists and psychotics have nevertheless something in common: the deprivation of the self. A loss of being that – I argue – is at the origin of the ordinariness of terrorists and the experience of void in psychotics. Two symptoms that reveal the condition of an intimate dryness, from a phenomenological and a metaphysical point of view as a consequence of a distorted relation with the world of life. I shall discuss how ordinariness is strictly related with the blurring definition of terrorism.

**KEY WORDS:** being-in-the-world, dehumanization, evildoing, ideology, islamic terrorism, loss of being, loss of reality, psychosis, phenomenology.

**RIASSUNTO.** Vi è diffuso consenso, tra gli studiosi, sul fatto che i terroristi islamici non siano folli, ma agiscano con deliberazione e piena consapevolezza dell'atto eversivo. Come spiegarne, allora, i gesti disumani? Questo articolo intende mostrare che, sebbene gli eversori non abbiano perduto il rapporto di trascendenza con il mondo della vita (Io-tu, Io-esso), sono tuttavia affetti da un inaridimento interiore derivante dal rapporto distorto con la realtà. Così, pur essendo lontani dalla condizione della psicosi, nel solco della lezione binswangeriana, anche i terroristi vivono un impoverimento che si manifesta nella perdita di essere personale e nell'indebolimento dell'identità. Provare questa intuizione, colta sul piano dell'osservazione fenomenologica, richiede un approccio metafisico all'azione, capace di esplorare il rapporto tra essere ed agire. In particolare, solo tematizzando il ruolo che il "sentire" riveste nella dinamica dell'atto umano, è possibile ammettere che il suo infiacchimento si riverbera drammaticamente sull'essere personale. Mentre il "sentire" è attutito, nello psicotico, dalla difficoltà di prendere le distanze dal mondo, nel terrorista è la conseguenza di due fattori concomitanti: 1) la prevalenza della componente negativa dell'ideologia che viene 2) favorita dalle dinamiche del gruppo eversivo. Se l'inaridimento patologico si manifesta, nel sofferente psicotico, attraverso l'esperienza del vuoto, nel terrorista esso si esprime nell'estrema ordinarità degli eversori. Proprio questo sintomo dell'inaridimento personale – si ipotizza – può aiutare a comprendere la difficoltà di capire e definire il fenomeno eversivo.

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** essere-nel-mondo, fenomenologia, inaridimento, male, perdita di essere, perdita di realtà, psicosi, trascendenza, terrorismo islamico.

## PREMISE

Terrorists are not considered mentally ill. This is the result of thirty years of investigations that have nevertheless not allowed to reach a consensus among international scholars based on a strong theoretical argument (1).

To say that Al Qaeda members are not psychotic, means that they are fully capable of understanding and willing. On the other hand, the most troubling aspect of global terrorism, from 9/11, concerns the *willingness* of terrorists to kill innocent civilians and (often) themselves in the process, a behaviour that cannot be considered properly human. The problem of terrorism can be expressed by a question: “How can a person, usually cultivated and highly educated, fully capable of understanding and willing, decide to kill, with no limits innocent people?”.

As many scholars argue, a thorough understanding of terrorists is imperative for stopping them (2). Multi-disciplinary approaches provided fruitful results in the past years: Applied Decisions Analysis Procedure has gained a comprehensive technique of process. The so called “psychological autopsies” have mainly focused on the motivations of terrorists. These researches, however, do not examine the philosophical implications between *being* and *acting* in the human subject. This kind of investigation is nevertheless highly revealing of the origin of dehumanization as a loss of identity and as an attitude to interrelate with the world of life.

This is the aim of my paper (3): I intend to focus on a condition that worries, because it cannot be properly said, a mental disease and, because of this, re-opens in all its depth the problem of evil (4).

## THE INVESTIGATION, THE ARGUMENT

I argue that phenomenology can really provide a strong argument in order to prove that terrorists are not psychotic, because it throws light upon the relation between person and the world of life. At the same time, terrorists and psychotics share a common symptom of dehumanization, that can be said a *loss of being* that depends on the *loss of reality*. This intimate dryness is not understood from the sole perspective of being-in-the-world: a further, metaphysical step, is required, towards the realm of sensing. Here is how the paper is organized.

The first part explores in what way a person can be said to be psychotic, and why terrorists are not insane. Then I'll briefly examine the condition of being-in-the-world of both persons with mental illness and terror-

ists: I'll show that Al Qaeda members still maintain the sense of transcendence, difference with people with mental illness, who are not able to make a distinction between them and reality outside them. Although their different human conditions, both terrorists and psychotics reveal a deprivation of sensing, that depends on the loss of relation with reality: it is voluntary, in the case of terrorists; it is not a consequence of a deliberation, in the case of psychotics.

This part will allow me to prove that, although terrorists cannot be considered mentally ill, they nevertheless suffer from a loss of being that is a specific consequence of a weakened relation with the sense and value of life. I shall be in a position to address the main topic of this short essay: to sketch a portrait of terrorists' dehumanization, in which the will plays a major role. I conclude, by highlighting what I consider to be one of the most significant symptoms of it. An ordinariness of the person that, more broadly, reflects on the phenomenon of terrorism itself and may throw light on the difficulty to define it: as I shall try to explain, this suggestion has something by way of plausibility. I also notice an analogy between ordinariness, consequence of the voluntary being out of the world, and the experience of void in mental diseases.

I'll show that studies in dehumanization of terrorists (compared with the one of people with mental disease) can achieve some interesting results also in the theoretical domain of philosophy (the rethinking of metaphysical realism of Aquinas) and neurosciences in dialogue with phenomenology and metaphysics, especially for what concerns the role of sensing in the pre-logical understanding of the world and the pre-moral foundation of the ethical conduct.

## HOW CAN A PERSON BE SAID PSYCHOTIC?

### *Being-in-the-world and mental illness*

To prove that terrorists are not insane, one needs to answer a preliminary question: “how can a person be said to be psychotic?” (5). Phenomenological psychiatry – since the major investigations of Binswanger at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – has traditional parameters in clinical psychiatry which have gone further and has attempted to contrast the natural sciences, by considering psychosis in the general frame of the human condition or *being-in-the-world*. Mental disease, in other words, deals with the original *in-der-Welt-Sein* of human beings. This perspective refers both to Heidegger and Husserl. The author of *Sein und Zeit* (6) Binswanger used the idea that mental suffering can be

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fully understood only if the patient is seen as a human being in relation to the world.

From Husserl (7), Binswanger learned the essential role of intentionality in the making of human existence. A person, he concluded, can be said mentally ill when he/she does not feel the distance between her self and the world. Or, as Binswanger pointed out, when someone feels nothing more than a thing among other things, having lost the transcendence with the otherness. Mental illness is, explained by Binswanger, expressed by the modification of fundamental structure and structural bonds of the being-in-the-world. Properly speaking, the relation I-You (I-It) is based on the separation of the living body from the world, an experience that follows “the narcissistic step where the body is – at the same time – subject and object of desire” (8). To be in the world, in this sense, throws light on the structure of human subjectivity as transcendence (9).

A psychotic person generally does not perceive himself/herself as a Self, as a subject, as someone that is different from an It, a thing, an object. Being out of the world, in mental diseases, is the consequence of a pathological condition that does not follow a decision.

Phenomenological observation of the subversive process, reveals symptoms of dehumanization in both people with mental illness and terrorists that ask to be carefully investigated for having a better understanding of the human condition in general.

## SENSING THE WORLD

The next aspect I'd like to talk about concerns the lack of reality that seems to affect – in different ways – terrorists and people with mental illness. I'll aim to prove that it is the consequence of the impoverishment of sensing, because of a weakened, getting in touch with reality. In both cases the loss of being primarily depends upon the specific being-in-the-world of these persons: terrorists voluntarily deny the world of life (*Lebenswelt*), as source of sense and value; psychotics do not perceive themselves as subjects because they are not able to experiment the sense of transcendence.

Nevertheless, the lack of reality cannot be understood only moving from the condition of being-in-the-world, as phenomenological psychiatry admits. An inner ground of the human being, precisely the level of sensing, deeply involved with being-in-the-world, needs to be carefully explored. That's why, in order to focus the intimate dryness of both Al Qaeda members and psychotics it is important to be precise regarding what is sensing, and its role in the making of a human act, integrating phenomenology and metaphysics.

Phenomenology of person has investigated the human act of sensing (in German *fühlen*), from Munich and Göttingen philosophers such as Scheler, Pfaender, and Stein, to quote some of the most important continental thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In recent years, in Italy, Roberta De Monticelli has explored the ethical side of sensing and has concluded that the more we sense, the more we respect the others and other things. This theoretical perspective is both highly meaningful and aporetic, especially in order to understand the origin of evil-doing in human beings.

At the same time De Monticelli's investigations have made known how the affective component of sensing is involved with ethical conduct, more than Göttingen and Munich philosophers did. However, the theoretical results provided by the Italian philosopher are problematic because – if sensing is considered, as De Monticelli does, a passive attitude, not a proper act – it cannot explain how sensing can orient ethical conduct: precisely, De Monticelli's thought the experience of sensing picks up values, but strictly speaking, it is only a cognitive act, *attention*, to bring these contents to the will.

The difficulty can be solved – I have argued and explored in my doctoral investigation – by integrating phenomenology of sensing with the metaphysics of human act. Moving from the *Quaestio 15* of the Saint Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* (10), that investigates the dynamics of human act, I could get a more comprehensive point of view. Sensing, in fact, presents itself as an essential component of the will, because of its two movements: it indicates the end of an action and let the will have a “taste” of the object itself.

We couldn't understand why “willing is a movement that brings about a change in our active relationship with the world” (11), if we cannot understand the role of sensing in the dialectic of the human act, precisely, in focusing the object of will and moving the will to it (intentionality). Sensing it is not just an affective component of the human act. It is also the ground level of understanding reality and an act that, bringing human beings in *rem exteriorem*, “towards the external things”, puts will in act.

These metaphysical achievements can integrate the phenomenological observation, by establishing the complexity of the act of sensing, its cognitive and ethical functions. I refer to Eugene Gendlin's masterpiece *Experiencing and the creation of meaning* (12), where the philosophical and psychological approach to subjectivity bring very close to the results of Aquinas' metaphysical realism. When Gendlin writes that: “Felt meaning functions as an ever-present experience parallel of all concepts – whatever is meaningful for us”,

he seems to recall what Saint Thomas pointed out in the *Summa Theologiae* talking about the consent, or “to sense with”. To quote: “*consentire importat applicationem sensus ad aliquid*”; “to join sensation to an object, that is the import of consenting”.

Neurosciences take into consideration the neurobiological role of sensing in making the so called “natural evidence” (13) that allows human beings to build their personal life as an active centre of emotion, understanding and willing. A number of mental diseases or cognitive or emotional deficiencies can be explained by this perspective. As De Monticelli noted, this research revealed a fruitful convergence with phenomenology of person, in order to explain how people can lose “familiarity with the world” of life (14).

This general premise about sensing is important to clarify that:

1. sensing is an original experience of the human being, and it is related to the human condition of being-in-the-world;
2. sensing plays a role in the ethical conduct not only because it “picks up” values, as phenomenology indicates, but because it moves will towards the good, as it can be achieved from a metaphysical perspective;
3. sensing also moves attention (a cognitive act, as previously mentioned) by presenting the object of the will.

I mentioned to achieve a conclusion that can be useful to the perspective of this paper: a person senses more or less, but it is impossible not to sense at all, in virtue of the condition of *being-in-the-world*. The different degrees of sensing motivate both the possibility of a therapy in the case of psychotics and terrorists to regret.

However, being-in-the world and sensing need to be considered together, as interrelated phenomena of human beings, in order to investigate the intimate dryness of terrorists and psychotics. This is what I hope to achieve in the following paragraphs.

## ISLAMIC TERRORISTS AND THEIR “IDEOLOGICAL” BEING-IN-THE-WORLD

Islamic terrorists take voluntarily the distance from the world of life assuming the negative ideology of Al Qaeda and joining the terroristic group. This negative attitude plays a major role in the subversive process because it prevails on the “positive” (*positum*) of ideology, on its content or beliefs. 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 most cases, terrorists have joined the subversive group moved by idealistic reasons (15). In other cases, like Nazi ideology, it is hard to find “positive” contents.

I argue, and try to show, that dehumanization of terrorists is not the consequence of brainwashing, but it is the end of a process in which personal deliberation always works.

Being part of a subversive group, as it happens in Al Qaeda, is a condition that reinforces the closure to the world of life. Moving from this premise it is possible to understand, according to a rigorous philosophical perspective, that:

1. terrorists are not mentally ill because they deliberate to deny the world of life;
2. reject a common predisposition to terrorism;
3. go beyond the idea that Islamic terrorism primarily depends on the religious contents of Al Qaeda ideology, a highly dangerous idea because it legitimates the so called clash of civilizations;
4. to sketch finally a portrait of dehumanization.

Bin Laden’s deadly declarations of radical hate towards Western countries and Western culture does not seem to be enough to originate unlimited violence. The doctrine of Al Qaeda, as I’ve aimed to show in my doctoral dissertation, becomes an effective instrument of death after a complex process of assimilation and socialization in subversive groups. Nothing to do with a “brainstorming”. In fact, as Sageman underlines, there is “no evidence” of mechanically acquired terroristic contents.

The closed society where terrorists are indoctrinated is the very heart of their dehumanization. The process is at the origin of the terrorists’ deprivation of sensing. It moves from the idea that nothing has value 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» (16).

Ideology, as Hannah Arendt wrote (17), is basically “the logic of an idea”. Assuming an ideology, in this classical perspective, written by Albert Camus in *The rebel* “to assume all the aspect of syllogism”. Propaganda techniques, especially in totalitarian states, have

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always served to measure the degree of this malleability. Arendt investigated, in *The origins of totalitarianism*, how Nazi ideology was able to brainwashing ordinary people. In the case of Islamic terrorists ideology seems to work in another way.

In my doctoral investigation (18) I've noticed that the logical dimension does not prevail on the self-determination of persons who enters Al Qaeda groups. The indoctrination, in other words, doesn't play a major role in making a terrorist. On the contrary, will is required when someone decides to join the group and it operates in about all the steps of the "career" of a terrorist. Hannah Arendt wrote that not everybody, in the Nazi SS knew the final goal of the operations. Usually, every agent was informed of only a specific task of the global process. In Al Qaeda groups everybody knows that the final end is destruction and self sacrifice. It is also incorrect to say that Islamic terrorists are, like Nazi leader Eichmann, persons with a lack of character who take refuge in a doctrine.

In the case of Al Qaeda terrorism, I argue, that another aspect reveals how ideology works on the inner being of a person. An aspect, I presume, that is still not taken into consideration. Ideology becomes dangerous not only because it changes reality into the logic of reality, as Arendt wrote, but also because of its power of excluding whatever does not belong within its contents. By doing this, ideology can become an instrument of mass destruction, without a need for brainwashing. Ideological denial prevails on ideological contents. From this premise, it can be understood why a person, originally moved by an idea of justice, can evolve into a terrorist with no pity for innocent victims.

### **LOSS OF BEING AS A RESULT OF SELF DELIBERATION. THE CASE OF TERRORISTS**

Now we are in a position to see that terrorists are not mentally ill because, in their destructive being-in-the world, they maintain the sense of transcendence. They can make a distinction between them selves and others; they continue to express their will; they have not been brainwashed.

However, if we consider their sensing the world of life, we conclude that they are affected by a loss of reality, a main component of a weakened identity. This condition of dehumanization can be accepted and understood only if we assume that sensing is not a passive but an active component in the dialectic of willing. It also can be resumed in the formula: "the less one sens-

es, the less one orients himself/herself to good, the less one can act freely, the more he/she acts with no limits".

Terrorists dehumanization deals both with their identity and action. Three are the main traits of the loss of being that reflects on the self: all of them participate in weakening human action.

1. Uniform identity takes the place of individual identity. In the terroristic 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 there is an ontological loss: the weakening of the experience of good.
3. Nothing makes sense, except the subversive group and the extreme ideology that forms it. The world of terrorists, considered as a source of sense and value, it is not the world of life, but the subversive action itself.

To move from the third to the fourth issue, I've to consider what is the relationship between self and will. Identity is a component of the will and an essential ingredient of self determination. As the Spanish philosopher Clavell writes: «without me it can't be any good for me» (19).

On a metaphysical level, identity is involved with will because it includes human act. Terrorists, I argue, suffer from a weakened identity that reverberates on human being's natural tension to good. What are the consequences on acting? Here is the fourth issue.

4. Two are the corollary effects of a weakened identity on human act. The first problem is in the order of the inclination (*inclinatio*) to the good; the second refers to the instruments that directs will to the end (*intentio*). A weakened and disordered intention, not correctly oriented to the end, will produce acts with some defects: 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) (20). And because order is the measure of music (21), this condition can be also called "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 explains why terrorists actions are disordered (lack of in-

tentionality) and unlimited (when no difference is perceived, to kill thousands of people is not a 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 precedes the decision and the moral judgment (22) about the action performed: it can exist only before making an act. When someone makes a choice, on the contrary, there is no place for indifference (23).

## PSYCHOTICS AND THEIR BEING-IN-THE-WORLD

Now we move briefly consider the condition of psychotics, from both the perspectives of being-in-the-world and sensing. This passage can reinforce the idea that terrorists are not mentally ill, but they also are affected by a common symptom of dehumanization, that is to say, the lack of identity.

Binswanger's *Daseinanalyse* (24) shows that a psychotic lives as an inadequate being in the world. It depends on the incapacity of perceiving herself/himself like a subject that is distant from the object. Broadly speaking in mental diseases this becomes evident with the transformation of fundamental structure of the human being, the relation with space, time and with the factuality of existence: they are in the world but they don't live in the world. It limits their understanding and their willing, functions without which cannot be given any proper experience of reality and of the self. From this viewpoint, it is incorrect to say that psychotics live out of the world; more ever people with mental disease find, in the alienated condition, the only way to be in the world. They are in the world but they cannot use the world and this means to be out in a certain sense, precisely they inhabit the world as objects, they are in the world as mere presences until when they can be in the world.

### *The experience of void in psychosis*

Void, in psychosis, can be said to be both an experience and a symptom of this peculiar being-in-the-world. As an experience, it is lived by the psychotic who feels the world is uncomfortable, as well as those who are not psychotic, who perceives a distance between his/her and the person with mental disease. With a schizophrenic person one feels frustrated, because of the incapacity to communicate, to have a truly interpersonal relation. Binswanger described this experience like the one of an empty crater (25).

The statement resumes with efficacy the ambivalence of void: something lived by the psychotic person

and perceived, at the same time, by others. It reveals an interior emptiness, as a consequence of the personal impoverishment. Precisely, a psychotic person suffers from a weakened self, that does not allow him/her a general relationship with others and other things, as a consequence of the lost transcendence.

People with mental diseases feel disoriented, as they do not have earth under their feet. How do they sense? In the psychotic experience, as Binswanger noted, there is no intentionality: the person senses reality, because of her/his being-in-the-world, but the intention – the reflexive movement of the self – is directed to the person itself, not to the world. This is not a condition that reinforces identity; in fact it happens to the contrary. Identity needs to make a distinction between I and You, between I and It. In the case of psychosis I and You are perceived as the same reality.

Void, on a neuronal level, is the consequence of the absence of a familiarity with reality; on a phenomenological ground it is a symptom of deprivation of being; in a metaphysical perspective it reveals a deficiency in assuming reality and a source of meaning and value. It is interesting to note that the three approaches converge to a point: reality participates to make human identity and human acting as well.

## TERRORISTS AND PSYCHOTICS. DIFFERENT ORIGIN OF DEHUMANIZATION

In both psychotics and terrorists – as in human condition in general – the relationship with reality is crucial in order to explain behaviours. They both are-in-the-world, but in a certain sense, they are also out-the-world, because they refuse it (Al Qaeda members) or they cannot relate to it (psychotics). However, they both need to be in a world: people with mental illness live in a state of delirium and hallucinations; terrorists concentrate all their efforts on subversive action and tribute them to sense and value. These results enable me to say that terrorists are not insane, but I recognize that they are affected by the highest degree of dehumanization, the condition in which human beings lose a part of themselves.

A question arising is: what component or function of the human being plays a major part in dehumanization?

Will seem to be crucial to make a distinction between psychotics and non psychotics. Terrorists, as I've tried to prove before, maintain their self determination from the beginning to the end of the process in which they are involved. However, I've noticed that their actions are disordered and unlimited in violence. What

does it mean? I reached the following conclusion: will is crucial to make a distinction between an act self determined and an act out of power of the person, but it is not enough to explain the nature of an action, especially to throw light on evildoing. In the case of terrorists, actions are supported by a full willingness, but the core problem is in the defects that mark those actions. Subversive actions are disordered and unlimited not primarily because a terrorist decides it, but because of the loss of identity and performing actions (intentionality) has a part in this process.

Are terrorists not insane? Yes, they are not, as I have tried to argue. It can be proved. But, in my opinion, it does not clarify the specific action of these people. On the opposite side, as I've tried to show, the comparative study of terrorists and psychotics which allows us to sketch only a more veritable profile of Al Qaeda members, but it also further explains some aspects of human condition, especially when examining dehumanization.

#### **A RELATION BETWEEN ORDINARINESS AND THE BLURRING DEFINITION OF TERRORISM**

At this point in the paper I suggest that in the conditioning of terrorists, there is a symptom of the internal void produced by the loss of being, as a result of a weakened sensing. I'll discuss the link between *ordinariness* of Islamic terrorists and the *blurring definition* of terrorism. It is known that Al Qaeda members are, at large, ordinary people. They are in most cases, people living an ordinary life. I quote a short passage of *Turning ordinary people into suicide bombers* (New Scientist, 23 July, 2005): «Ask someone to sketch a personality profile of a typical suicide bomber (...). None of them had a criminal record. None was mentally ill, none was especially poor, and they were mostly well educated».

Hoffman, author of the well known essay *Inside terrorism* (26) wrote in his preface that he was always dumbstruck by «how disturbingly 'normal' most terrorists seem». Mohamed Atta and the others who piloted the airliners 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».

The first step of the discussion concerns a more general problem. Other phenomena – like for instance time and suffering – are hard to define, but they are in

no way comparable with terrorism. In fact, time and suffering present a strong intuitive, experiential knowledge, that prevails on the rational understanding. Terrorism does not do this. In the case of terrorism – and Islamic terrorism as well – two aspects are joined: first of all, it is the consequences of “differences in worldview” that “make this concept slipper and controversial” (27); on the other hand, it is really hard to focus on who the terror agents are, how they relate, how they live, how they think, how they move. The first problem has been solved with a broad consensus definition: «Terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi)clandestine individual, group or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons, whereby – in contrast to assassination – the direct targets of violence are not the main target. The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selective (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population, and serve as message generators. Threat- and violence-based communication processes between terrorist (organization), victims, and main targets are used to manipulate the main target (audiences), turning it into target of terror, a target of demands or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought» ([www.unodc.org/terrorism\\_definitions.html](http://www.unodc.org/terrorism_definitions.html)).

The second aspect – the relation between invisibility of terror agents and blurring definition of phenomenon – has not been investigated, but it might be advantageous, also in order to reach a more theoretical consensus. What I'm going to explore is the relationship between the deprivation of being a terrorists and the lack of meaning of the phenomenon.

The notion of ordinariness that I take into consideration is quite different from the classical ones expressed by Arendt and Baumann. These two perspectives indicate the origin of ordinariness outside the person, in the logic of an ideology. Precisely, the author of *The origin of totalitarianism* has proposed a theory of ordinariness as a consequence of bureaucracy. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the classical report on “banality of evil”, the author 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» (28). This has been investigated by Baumann, who went further than Arendt, by writing that «the routine processes produce dehumanization» (29).

This process is shown in two steps:

1. violence must be authorized;
2. victims must be considered not human beings, but something like “objects”.

Both in Arendt and Baumann theories of ordinariness we see persons who seem incapable of expressing their will. In other words, they appear to have been brainwashed: robots, not persons.

The concept of ordinariness in Al Qaeda terrorism, on the contrary, deals with the notion of an internal void produced both by the subversive ideology and being part of terroristic group. It is interesting to note that metaphors are often used to talk about terrorism. "Phenomenon with no face" or "with an absent face" are the most recurrent. The subject matter (terrorism) is referred to by a sentence that does not literally describe it; it is a vehicle of understanding of something (the phenomenon of terrorism) with a negation (no face; absent face).

On a phenomenological level this use of the language is highly revealing of an inner deficiency. A deficiency of sense that, I argue, belongs to the personal impoverishment of terror agents, a consequence – as I've tried to prove before – of an ideological being-in-the-world.

Only in this perspective, ordinariness of terrorists can be compared with the one of psychiatry. Terrorists' internal void depends on the deliberated closure to sense and value of life; the pathological void, in schizophrenia and in a wide number of depressions, is the consequence of the incapacity of the person to have a familiarity with reality. Unlike psychotics, who behave in a way that reveals the pathological conditions, terrorists are common people, ordinary men and women who work, pray, seem integrated in social life.

Moving from the phenomenon of terrorism I can show consistencies to the classical notion of evil-doing as loss of being (Agustin, Aquinas). This philosophical research may be of a relevant interest also in the studies on violence in general: terrorism, in fact, is only a specific phenomenon in which apparently normal people cause unlimited wrongdoing. The research I propose could also be fruitful in the field of psychiatry, in order to draw a line between personality disorders and willing-sensing disorders.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper was aimed at outlining some of the traits of Islamic terrorists' dehumanization. To do this, it was important to show why an agent of terror cannot be said to be a person with a mental disease. I've found in phenomenology of persons a strong argument to show this: because a terrorist assumes the negative ideology and decides to enter the subversive group, he/she expresses his/her will. Differently from psychotics, terrorists maintain the sense of transcendence, because they

perceive the difference between themselves and reality; differently from the Nazi missions described by Hannah Arendt, they know the process in which they're involved in and the consequences of their actions. However, the fact that terrorists are (generally) not insane, amplifies, if it is possible, the problem of intentional evil-doing. Their "disturbing normality" cannot be explained by moving from the terrorists' being-in-the-world: they are capable of willing and understanding, but at the same time their actions brings to light symptoms of dehumanization. They do not respect other persons and other things, they kill innocent people. They are not insane, but they suffer from an inner deficiency.

In order to focus this personal impoverishment I have noticed an analogy with the condition of people with mental illness. Psychotics suffer from an internal void, consequence of not being in touch with reality. Terrorists too, I've argued, live the effects of the impoverishment of sensing, an act that – on the metaphysical ground – reveals a crucial role in human acting. Without being in touch with reality means not to be able to direct will to an end.

It is not only a moral matter. First of all, this double movement (it goes to the thing and tastes it, than it acts), help participates to build one's identity, then it makes it stronger, day by day. A lack of being (that reflects on acting). Intended to prove what is common to psychotics and terrorists, but it originates in different ways, moving from a different being-in-the-world. People with mental illness have problems in giving birth to their identity. Terrorists weaken their identity in consequence of both assuming the negative ideology of Al Qaeda and joining the hate-groups in which the subversive process is planned. On a philosophical level I've noticed a convergence between the phenomenological observation of dehumanization and the loss of being as it was discovered by the metaphysical realism of Thomas Aquinas. This philosophical approach, in fact, seems to provide a better foundation of the very nature of sensing, not only an emotional component of human being, but the inner ground of ethical conduct.

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- ly understood phenomenon», as Vetlesen writes. «To do evil - he maintains - is to inflict pain intentionally on other human beings against his or her will and causing serious and foreseeable harm». In: Vetlesen AJ. *Evil and Human Agency. Understanding Collective Evil*, op. cit., pag. 75.
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