

The Philosophical Challenge of September 11

Tom Rockmore, Joseph Margolis, and Armen T. Marsoobian, eds.
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Huschle, eds.
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The events of September 11, 2001, have challenged many disciplines and professions, but have they really engendered a *philosophical* challenge? The title of this book suggests they have, and if so one would expect its contributors to show how the violence perpetrated that day and in its aftermath has challenged philosophy. In fact, few of the otherwise interesting essays do this very clearly.

Actually, only a bare majority of the thirteen contributors work as philosophers, and not all of those who do actually appeal to philosophical material or concerns to address 9/11. Inversely, the approach of some non-philosopher contributors is more philosophical than that of the philosophers. The collective product takes into consideration political, historical, rhetorical, and indeed some philosophical material. The topics addressed range from accounts events and their contexts to more theoretical analyses and interpretations. Best exemplifying the former is George Leaman's well researched piece about the capitalist motives underlying the so-called war on terror. And best exemplifying the latter is Angelica Nuzzo's brilliant use of Hegelian dialectic to demystify the purported reasons, justifications, and grounds for that war. In between are mutually supportive opinion pieces which try either to shed some interpretive light on the US response or to suggest ways of countering its alleged excesses.

Efforts at interpretation focus on ideologies. Political scientist Andrew Norris discerns a post-9/11 Machiavellian mind set operative in the Bush Administration, and argues that the resulting executive sovereignty embodies ideals propounded by pro-Nazi German political theorist Carl Schmitt. Political scientist Joseph M. Schwartz argues that the Bush Administration has in effect drawn upon just war theory to rationalize its so-called war on terrorism but it does so fallaciously because it disregards the historical and sociological origins of unrest in Afghanistan and the Middle East pre-9/11. In furtherance of this critique economist Amartya Sen disparages the simplistic clash-of-civilizations thesis that some self-satisfied Western intellectuals substitute for in-depth understanding of complex socio-political confrontations all over the world.

Marxist historian of philosophy Domenico Losurdo takes 9/11 and its aftermath as an occasion to argue that Americans are, and they taught the Nazis how to be, racists. Staying closer to realpolitik, philosopher Tom Rockmore attributes the US's attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq to an unstated and morally insufficient geopolitical strategy.

Proposed counter-measures range from praxis to policy moves. Diplomatic operative Shibley Telhami insists that the US must learn to see beyond Israeli priorities if it is ever to serve as a neutral broker in the Middle East. International relations specialist Davis B. Bobrow argues that in fighting terrorism the US needs to follow established criteria of great-power statecraft if it is to stop engendering rather than surmounting opposition. Mounting a consequentialist argument, legal scholar Ronald Dworkin faults US domestic responses to terrorism for being not only illegal but indifferent to the civil and human rights of others. Feminist political scientist Drucilla Cornell castigates amoral US and Israeli military tactics that utterly disregard the right to life of people who happen to be in the way and offers as an antidote the transnational protests of groups such as Women in Black.

Philosopher Joseph Margolis claims that, because the so-called war on terrorism is being fought unilaterally by an uncontrollable superpower, it eludes the strictures of just war theory and moral universalism. He may be right, but he doesn't say how philosophers, qua philosophers, might help remedy this distressing situation. And this lacuna points to a key problem with the book: does it really identify the philosophical challenge of September 11? Some contributors write about why the US did what it did post-9/11 and others about what needs to be done differently and/or by others to correct the US's missteps. But apart from Nuzzo's excellent essay the closest anyone comes to identifying a recognizably philosophical challenge is Margolis's allusion to the death of just war theory.

Philosophical Challenge is multi-disciplinary and is aimed at professional academics—including, of course, serious students—so would not be a likely choice for a philosophy text. By contrast, Trudy Govier's *A Delicate Balance: What Philosophy Can Tell Us About Terrorism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Westview, 2002) would serve this purpose admirably. Her accessibly written book draws on mainstream philosophical positions to examine justifications for violence as these relate to post-9/11 events, and would be a relevant entree or supplement to various normative studies.

Other relevant works that interconnect philosophical content and/or methodology and important concrete political questions are roughly of two kinds, those that remain embedded in the worldview created by Western political rhetoric and those that examine political behavior from a perspective that transcends rationalized inbred thinking. Among the former are analyses of the meaning and morality of terrorism, e.g., *Terrorism and International Justice**,

ed. James P. Sterba (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), and J. Angelo Corlett's *Terrorism: A Philosophical Analysis* (Boston: Kluwer, 2003) or of a violence-prone Western political actor, e.g., Peter Singer's *The President of Good and Evil** (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004). Among the latter are works that analyze and assess political behavior from a supra-cultural perspective, e.g., John Keane's *Violence and Democracy** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and a recent collection of essays entitled *Justice and Violence: Political Violence, Pacifism and Cultural Transformation*, ed. Allan Eickelmann, Eric Nelson, and Tom Lansford (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005). (Asterisked titles are reviewed in *Teaching Philosophy* 27:2 [June 2004]: 181-184; 27: 4 [December 2004]: 388-391; and 28:4 [December 2005]: 376-378, respectively.) This meta-parochial perspective calls to mind the Stoics, Leibniz on the Lisbon earthquake, and some of the German Idealists on revolution as recounted in Andrew Fiala's *The Philosopher's Voice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002). But for our times no philosophical work more successfully challenges parochial thinking about the justifiability of war than Jonathan Glover's already classic *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale Nota Bene, 2001; orig. 1999).

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