

Asymmetric Culpability: An Analogy

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, symmetry of culpability doesn't exist. This is largely because there is neither parity of responsibility nor is there parity of guilt between the Palestinians and the I.G. Therefore, the conflict should be addressed accordingly. Any "solution" must be prescribed by taking this into account.

- The asymmetrical culpability is due to three huge asymmetries:
- The nature of each side itself
- The harm each has incurred from the other
- The iniquitous acts each has perpetrated against the other.

To illustrate this, imagine the following scenario:

One day, you are walking along and come across an altercation between two individuals. One is a grown man with a large build: tall, muscular, and—apparently—quite athletic. The other is a child—a small girl who is noticeably weak. The disparity in strength is significant. The man has the young girl pinned to the ground. He is strangling her and is hitting her repeatedly in the torso and face. The girl, squirming, is struggling in vain to free herself. She is fighting back by clawing in desperation at the man's ankles and wrists.

Naturally, you are appalled. Before you have a chance to react, another bystander notifies you that this has been going on regularly, all day long, day in and day out, month after month, for quite some time. Each day, the girl is barely allowed enough time to eat and sleep, the bystander explains to you. (Evidently, he's been observing this on a daily basis for a while now.)

Now, you're even more appalled...not just at the grown man, but at the bystander who has—apparently—been observing this day after day without intervening.

"Why doesn't someone do something?" you ask the bystander.

"Alas, it seems to be an insoluble predicament," is his answer.

"Come again?"

He shrugs and sighs. "Well, you see, the man keeps assaulting the girl and holding her down because she keeps clawing at his wrists and ankles. He says that he'd stop accosting her if she'd just stop clawing at him. So, you see, there seems to be an impasse."

“An impasse?”

“Well, you see, they’re BOTH wrong: It’s wrong to claw at another person just as it’s wrong to hold another person down, strangle them and hit them. Violence is always wrong. There are no innocent parties here. One won’t stop until the other stops. A catch-22, I guess.” The bystander shrugs his shoulders again and shakes his head with another sigh.

The analogy is imperfect, but salient. Here, we see a glaring asymmetry of culpability—primarily attributable to a significant disparity of both responsibility and of guilt. The disparity in responsibility derives from the corresponding disparity of POWER. The disparity of guilt derives from the grossly disproportionate response of one side vis-à-vis the other side. Proportionally, one side incurs the lion’s share of the harm while the other side engages in the lion’s share of iniquitous action. Which side of the feud should desist first?

As the metaphor illustrates, in a feud that involves a massive power asymmetry and enormously disproportionate retaliation the onus is on the more powerful antagonist perpetrating the brunt of the offense to cease and desist first.

The IG insisting that the Palestinians first “recognize” Israel before it will liberate Palestine is an absurd game. When a State that already exists demands to be “recognized” by a people who don’t yet have a State before it will recognize their right to have a State, a queer logic is afoot. Here, a State that now exists demands that a State that doesn’t exist recognize the extant State as a condition for coming into existence—but, in the meantime, the extant State will refuse to allow the State that it currently won’t allow to exist to exist. Get it?

The typical excuse provided for this is untenable. The IG insists that it won’t liberate the Palestinians until “the Palestinians” stop using violence—as if it were the Palestinians in unison that were perpetrating violence whenever an attack harms Israeli civilians. In reality, for every one Palestinian protestor that (tragically) resorts to violence, there are millions that stick to non-violent protest every day—even as they endure relentless oppression, brutal occupation, and vicious persecution each day of their lives. Meanwhile, it is the IG that routinely resorts to unconscionable violence against a civilian population—demolishing homes without remorse, mercilessly bombing public infrastructure, and ruthlessly murdering families as a matter of official policy. Who are the terrorists here?