



A Brief Introduction To The Issue

There are many false choices found in the public discourse. That is to say, there are certain debates predicated on faulty dichotomies. When this happens, the resolution of an issue simply boils down to “pick a side: A or B” (where A and B are pre-defined alternatives). With such misleading “either/or” ultimatums, one is compelled to take a position that is—invariably—ill-conceived. The predicament is based on a battle between myopic views—each of which is based on the same dubious assumptions.

In such cases, the position of both sides is defective, for each is a function of a gross mischaracterization of the issue at hand. Even so, it is tempting to “pick a side” in such feuds...then devote one’s time and energy to accumulating an arsenal of rationalizations to retro-actively validate that choice. This validation becomes one’s mission, and often becomes a source of one’s esteem, of one’s identity, of a hallowed sense of purpose.

When this happens, mutual recriminations become vitriolic, persistent, and on-going—precluding any possibility of resolving the underlying issues. Intransigence becomes standard operating procedure. Each camp indulges in caricatures of itself and of the other, often resorting to guilt-by-association when pointing the finger in all places but a mirror. A pathological divisiveness sets in, and defiance soon governs the posture of everyone involved. (Sound familiar?)

An example of this scenario is deciding whether one is for or against “capitalism” / “socialism” per se, rather than seeking to promote healthy (delimited) capitalism / socialism. Consequently, the crucial question is rarely posed: WHY are the unhealthy versions of capitalism / socialism unhealthy? Ascertaining what is healthy vs. unhealthy about an economic system (qua economic system) is not nearly as straight-forward as endorsing archetypes...and simply joining a pre-established “camp” according to the categories on offer. Pitting capitalism against socialism, we come to find, is like pitting one vitamin against another in an effort to formulate a nutritious diet. Yet when the Vitamin A team is pitted against the Vitamin B team, we’re tempted to rally around one side or another, because that’s what we homo sapiens are inclined to do.



In academia, the most famous example of a false dichotomy was the argument pitting an absolutely deterministic neurology (essentially, a native / congenital pre-determinacy) with an absolute behaviorism (i.e. the absolute neuro-plasticity of a “blank slate”). The latter absolutism was epitomized by B.F. Skinner and then by post-modernism (where everything is a mere construct—a function of conditioning from one’s environment). Also known as “nature” vs. “nurture”, science (and common sense) has revealed both sides of this argument to be (obviously) wrong, while each side—it turns out—contained an aspect of the real explanation. Half a century ago, Chomsky resolved this false dichotomy via a new science of language acquisition, which revealed there is an element of truth to both “sides” of that wrong-headed debate. Doing so required bucking the entrenched orthodoxy in both camps.

In a salient way, the Israel-Palestine “argument” needs to be resolved in a similar fashion.

Another example of a false dichotomy is found in the (false) choice to be for or against Marx—a decision that requires approving or disapproving of “Marx” wholesale. The choice entails either romanticizing the man (thereby obfuscating his mistakes) or vilifying him as the source of that menacing thing called “Marxism” (thereby throwing the baby out with the bathwater). When we argue for or against in this way, what we’re doing is positing mutual exclusivity where none need exist. We reify “Marx” in various ways, then argue over which reification should matter most... thereby completely missing the point of the discussion: What is good about an economic system and what isn’t?

We see similar faulty dichotomies with our view of religions: for or against Islam / Christianity (or even: for or against religion itself). We want to assess things wholesale, and either embrace them or eschew them as such. We want to indulge in making a ready-made choice rather than scrutinizing the elements of which each thing is comprised. Critiquing each element independently doesn’t fit well into the either/or narrative. Thus, we hear such inane arguments as:

- For or against “America”
- For or against abortion
- For or against “free enterprise”
- For or against gun control
- For or against taxation
- For or against individual liberties

The reality is that (usually) any given social construct is a mixed bag—replete with positive and negative elements that have been cobbled together in a package deal by non-disinterested players. Alas, parsing every prepackaged alternative makes assessments complicated, messy, and provisional. Taking a stand (something we are all tempted to do) becomes more than a matter of “picking a team”; it becomes a methodical process of meticulous parsing. People would much rather shop around for what’s on offer, and make a selection once they are “sold on” something.

Alas, we humans like closure and certainty...and package deals. Humans like taking a side, then supporting that decision post hoc, ad hoc (while waging war against the opposition). Subsequently, there is pride to be preserved, face to be saved. Yet...this enticing tribalistic proclivity has only served to sabotage our public discourse. Time after time, it has prevented us from being able to formulate REAL solutions to on-going problems.

By their nature, institutions compete as institutions—and are thus denounced or promoted as a whole. The key to addressing an issue is to judiciously parse each of the available options into its constituent elements, then evaluate each element independently of its affiliations. Such parsing is a matter of embracing the good elements while pruning the bad elements of each institution-in-question. Doing so means neither glorifying nor demonizing any given institution, but rather subjecting it to objective critical analysis.

In this way, we avoid false choices. Instead of endorsing or rejecting an institution wholesale, we make a (disinterested) discerning judgment about its elements. Of course, no assessment can be perfectly impartial, but we can at least make a concerted effort to rise above emotional attachments. Parsing the good elements from the bad elements is no easy task, as we are all tempted to endorse pre-defined “package deals”. Inevitably, any given party’s circumstances tends to form vested interests in this institution or that. (After all, this is the point of having institutions.)

The alternative approach is often inconvenient for each party involved, as it requires rising above vested interests. Proceeding in this new way means eliminating conflicts of interest from the evaluation process—something nobody is eager to do. In order to accomplish this feat, one must first recognize that all institutions are social constructs—accidents of history—and that each person’s affiliation (emotional attachment) is a byproduct of circumstance.

We homo sapiens have an ingrained aversion to a cosmopolitan approach because we are primally hardwired to be tribalistic. Due to this ubiquitous penchant for tribalism, we all tend to cast all things in terms of “us against them”. We are rarely inclined to broaden our sphere of kinship to all mankind, as such a move has been impractical for most of human history. So we must marshal the self-discipline to overcome this penchant, lest we remain entrenched in reactionary mindsets—and mired in otherwise avoidable stalemates.

The problem of false choice is nowhere more flagrant than with the (misleadingly-labeled) Israel-Palestine conflict. In this ill-conceived either/or, we are offered the choice between two “sides”: pro-Israel or anti-Israel. Most of us are confronted with this provocative choice, and expected to PICK ONE. Since each of us has different biases and interests (for reasons beyond our immediate control), one or the other alternative seems more appealing. It is easy, then, for many of us to become infatuated with one alternative or the other, and plant our flag in it.

The notion of being simultaneously pro-Palestinian AND pro-Israeli is thereby rendered anathema. Such a view doesn’t fit well within the categories on offer: Are you for the Palestinians or for the Israelis? (In other words, are you against the Israelis or against the Palestinians?) Which is it? These are the available options. This is the scope of the debate. The issue is defined in this way. Make your selection, stake your claim, then stick to your guns.

The prevailing dichotomy is faulty because it conflates two things that are fundamentally distinct: the well-being of the civilian population of Israel (which is primarily Jewish) and the sanction of certain policies of the Israeli government (which may or may not be in the best interest of everyone involved). Both things (people and government policies) are thereby subsumed under one label “Israel”, thereby neglecting the crucial distinction between them. It’s a common mistake: confusing a regime for the civilian population over which it presides. Reactionaries do the same thing here in America: “Criticize U.S. foreign policy? Well, then, you’re criticizing ‘America’.”

The consequence of this conflation is that one is forced to either support the Israeli government categorically (if one is interested in the safety of Israeli civilians)...or one opens oneself up to anti-Semitic sympathies (if one finds certain IG policies objectionable). As a consequence, being Pro-Israeli yet against certain IG policies is

rendered untenable. The position doesn't fit within the prevailing narrative. Indeed, it doesn't even make sense according to the terms of the debate. Thus, the actual solution to the problem isn't even seen as a viable option.

In this scheme, one is either "for" or "against" Zionism, in the same way that a sports fan opts to be for or against a given team. Because of this false choice, the feud is "rigged"—doomed to an eternal impasse: someone must win, someone must lose. So one is compelled to decide which one's the good guy and which one's the bad guy...and let the feud proceed from there.

The key, then, is to reject this faulty dichotomy. To do so, one must recast the issue as being one of a healthy Zionism vis a vis an unhealthy Zionism. Such an alternative is precisely what masonscott.org aims to elucidate. The point here is to promote a humanitarian version of Zionism (one that espouses rights, interests, and security for BOTH Palestinians and Israelis) while eschewing what could be deemed a right-wing (or "revisionist") version of Zionism (which essentially amounts an agenda of ethnic supremacy—based on ethnic purity). One approach is based on agape (i.e. species being) while the other is based on an ethno-centric worldview (i.e. tribalism). Both approaches (HZ and RZ) seek to protect the interests of Jews, but in strikingly different ways: one in unison with an analogous protection of the Palestinians, the other at the expense of the Palestinians.

By casting the issue in these cosmopolitan terms, all parties can come together and find common ground. Here's the catch: The parties can only do so based on principles that transcend tribal agendas or ethnic identities. This is a difficult task, as it involves transcending part of one's own identity—and even transcending that which gives one a sense of purpose / pride.

NOTE: I have adopted "Canaan" to refer to the region in question, as it is a neutral name. Its basis is independent of either "Palestinian" or "Israeli" identities. Indeed, "Palestine" was originally neither a Muslim nor an Arab label, but the name given by the Roman Empire to the region. Palestinians must recognize that "Palestine" carries with it much baggage, as the name was established after the Romans slaughtered and evicted Jews from Canaan. Likewise, Jews must recognize that "Israel", "Judea" and "Samaria" are labels that carry with them baggage, as they are exclusive to the Hebrew legacy, and thus inherently exclusionary. (These terms are products of Jewish folklore, and thus elide a basis for trans-cultural solidarity.) All

divisive labels (nay, any “loaded” terms that carry with them biased connotations) must be eschewed in formulating a way forward. Therefore, this discourse jettisons the names endorsed by EITHER Arabs/Muslims OR Jews for the region in question.

This new proposal comes after generations—on each side—of romanticizing (even glorifying) the in-group while vilifying and de-humanizing (even demonizing) the other. Heretofore, the “us vs. them” mentality has determined the terms in which such issues are cast. It is in this way that the radicals (the hidebound ideologues) on each side ruin things for everyone else—be they Hamas or the Judean Settler Movement. The present proposal would defuse the ability of such radicals to define the terms of the debate—eventually rendering them irrelevant (and properly condemned by all responsible people).

We must understand: The dysfunctional scheme is seductive because it is so straight-forward. In this scheme, all that ails the in-group is typically blamed on the other. Such a notion appeals to our basest instincts. This blame-game justifies the in-group/out-group categorization: the very categorization on which many people depend in order to make sense of their world. Consequently, the in-group feels chronically slighted by the other, blames the other, and the ensuing resentment only serves to reinforce the tribalism (and parochialism) that created it.

On-going, seething resentment compels each party toward an urge for vengeance and retribution—thereby perpetuating the conditions on which the conflict is based. The mutual antagonism engenders a self-fulfilling prophecy: it corroborates the suspicions...thus exacerbating the conflict. Solving problems becomes ONLY a matter of waging war against—and defeating—the other. In other words, the only possible solution becomes: “We win, they lose.” That is the only conceivable end-game. Therefore, all paths forward are assessed according to their amenability to that goal. Anything WE do is—by definition—fighting for justice; anything THEY do is—by definition—terrorism. And that’s all there is to it.

The problem is: This perspective is symmetrical (even if the transgression / culpability is not). Regardless of what transpires, the narrative will lead both parties to define everything in this way. No matter what happens, the espoused proposition can only ever possibly be confirmed with respect to each party. That the proposition is the same for each party is an irony that is lost. Whatever YOU do corroborates that you are the bad guy; whatever WE do corroborates that we are, indeed, the good guy.

Breaking from this delinquent Manichean perspective requires a concerted effort... made by both parties. The bottom line is to ensure that no group is marginalized, demeaned, or exploited by any other. This is easier said than done. For it mandates that everyone emancipate himself from his coveted tribalistic mindset. In this way, all may agree: Everyone matters because all humans matter equally. Put another way: there is no subaltern portion of the global population. This isn't a matter of "compromise"; it's a matter of adhering to universal principles. Thus, to each party, it must be said: "This isn't all about you; it concerns all of us, because—ultimately—we're all in this together."

This means seeing the other as "one of us". We can thereby see that the question isn't who's tribalism is the right tribalism; but that the tribalism itself has been the problem all along. Indeed, recognizing the shared humanity in the other is the only way forward for ANY human conflict. Ultimately, it is lack of human solidarity that enables tribalism to metastasize. HZ is predicated on human solidarity, which makes it the only moral version of Zionism.

Indeed, if one is to be morally consistent, RZ is wrong for the same reason that anti-Semitism is wrong: ALL forms of racism are wrong. That is to say, racism is wrong no matter what form it takes. Indeed, if a kind of behavior is categorically wrong for one group, it's categorically wrong for all groups. (There is a term for a person who thinks that all racism is bad except for his own version of it: Racist.)

The analysis of the Israel-Palestine conflict proceeds from the following maxims: In a just world, no group is uniquely privileged. In a humane world, a certain group of people doesn't have dominion over all other people. That is to say: there is no uniquely privileged group of people. In this view, everyone is seen as important; everyone "matters", and is treated accordingly. Humanitarian Zionism (HZ) is predicated on these points.

In this new Zionist scheme, all people involved are recognized most fundamentally as humans. To see every person in Canaan first and foremost as a fellow human being is difficult to do for those whose sense of identity and pride is a function of tribal heritage / legacy. Our point of departure, therefore, must be what Kant dubbed the Categorical Imperative. The Categorical Imperative knows neither Arab nor Jew, Palestine nor Israel, Koran nor Torah; it sees only humans. That is the only way to resolve the conflict currently plaguing the Middle East—or, for that matter, to resolve any conflict in the world.