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NEWSLETTER ON INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

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**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
PHILOSOPHICAL ENGAGEMENT:
DAVIDSON'S PHILOSOPHY
AND CHINESE PHILOSOPHY**



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The published paper tries to convince the Israeli public of the morality of the IDF's actions, thus raising the question for public discussion. But the main use of the IDF's Ethical Code is quite different. The Ethical Code is presented to the soldiers as an order. Its main effect is to make any moral objections to military activities both illegitimate and unethical. Its main effect is thus also to silence criticism. This time, to silence any moral criticism soldiers may have of the orders they are given. Thus we see that some philosophers may use applied philosophy to contribute to the silencing of moral criticism.³

Let's summarize. I believe that the present Israeli leaders do not want dialogue and do not want to settle for peace. Rather, they want the present kind of war to go on until its bitter end. Hence the military effort to preserve and tighten the occupation is accompanied by a rhetorical attack whose main effect is to prevent the possibility of dialogue. And it is very effective. Even the recent Geneva agreement, based on dialogue between important and reputable politicians on both sides (supported presumably by around 50% of the population)—did nothing to change Israel's move toward a dialogue.

We are stuck. Language is bankrupt, for it has lost its power to convince and commit. It became more a game of public relations, the sophist's weapon of relativism, to make all voices equal. The true, the false, and the ugly all become equal and indistinguishable. The outside powers have to mediate and pressure both sides to end the occupation and cease fire. This responsibility rests on the international community and especially on the U.S. The U.S. has supported the Israeli occupation and even the extreme and immoral measures it has been using. It has the responsibility to stop supporting Israel. Israel is so dependent on the U.S. for its daily existence that the U.S. is capable of pressuring Israel with relatively simple means, like sanctions. As a moral agent, the U.S. has a responsibility to pressure Israel to end the occupation and respect the human rights of the Palestinians.

Moreover, the responsibility to act to end the occupation also rests on philosophers, qua philosophers. It is rather surprising, I think, that the recent flourish of applied philosophy enabled the army of occupation to enlist this expertise in aid of its public relations efforts; yet it did not get philosophers to organize in an effort to end this immoral and endless occupation. How come we don't have a "philosophers without borders" or "philosophers for human rights" organization that will take a *public stand* and attempt to influence international public opinion? Maybe it is time for us, here and now, not to limit our efforts to an occasional lecture at a philosophy conference, but to organize "philosophers for dialogue in the Middle East," and make a much more public stand.

Endnotes

1. These are not the only extreme measures, but it seems that the other measures, like endless curfews, road blocks, incidental and not so incidental killing, house demolition, destruction of fields—all these seem to be more "normal," and thus "accepted," measures used in Western wars.
2. The English translation of the Code can be found on the net at http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/Society_&_Culture/IDF_ethics.html
3. There are other clear examples that show that Israel acts to silence moral criticism: The Palestinian Peace Movement is completely ignored by the Israelis. The shooting of non-violent demonstrators, e.g., against the wall; punishing excessively the small group of conscientious objectors, while allowing others to quietly sneak through the system, so that the general impression is that this is a very small group, etc.

The Light of Reason and the Right of Return¹

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I have to confess that the title of this panel fills me with trepidation. It is too reminiscent of the patronizing attitude that one often gets from a certain type of superior outsider: "This irrational conflict has been going on for centuries; why don't you set aside your atavistic passions, see the light of reason, and simply get along?" This is the same type of attitude that casts the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an age-old religious war that has been raging in the Middle East since Cain and Abel, or at least a continuation of the feud between Ishmael and Isaac. The dominant image is that of two wild-eyed adversaries destroying each other and everyone around them over a dispute that more reasonable folks would have settled over coffee.

I take it that this caricature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would be implausible to anyone who has more than a passing familiarity with its history. Even though it is quite prevalent in the media and the Western popular imagination, this attitude toward the conflict need not detain us. A more plausible account is the one provided by my students in Beirut. When I asked them what they thought of the question whether reason could be the basis for dialogue in the Middle East, one of them reacted by saying that the conflict was not a matter of reason or lack thereof, but rather simply that the two sides start from different premises. As she put it, "cultural differences" influence "the way different peoples interpret things and... produce diffe[rent] premises."² Another observed more cynically that these premises are themselves often manufactured to suit the conclusions that one wants to reach in any case. She went on to say: "people want to reach certain conclusions and [so they] build premises to support the conclusions."³ What these two students were saying, in part, is that it does not seem to be a question of instrumental rationality, which takes us from premises to conclusion, or means-end rationality, which specifies the route to a particular goal. Indeed, the central disputes in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict often call to mind the old philosophical adage that one philosopher's modus ponens is another's modus tollens. To illustrate, it might help to recall the recent and much-publicized interview with the Israeli historian Benny Morris, published in *Haaretz* earlier this year. In that interview, Morris effectively argues as follows⁴:

If the Palestinians hadn't been expelled, Israel would not have been established.⁵

Israel should have been established.

Therefore, the Palestinians should have been expelled.

By contrast, those who think that the creation of Israel led to an injustice to the Palestinians would turn this instance of modus tollens around, converting it into an instance of modus ponens:

If the Palestinians hadn't been expelled, Israel would not have been established.

The Palestinians should not have been expelled.

Therefore, Israel should not have been established.

Both arguments fit the canons of instrumental rationality, but they are clearly diametrically opposed.

If instrumental rationality is not the point, then it is tempting to think that a more substantive form of rationality is what is at issue, and that the kind of reason we should be concerned with is that which supplies us with the premises themselves. A look at one of the thorniest disputes in the conflict may help test this hunch. Nothing about the conflict seems to excite greater passions than the question of the Palestinian right to return to their homeland. Many Israelis even refuse to use the expression “right of return,” fearing that acknowledging it as a right may commit them to its legitimacy, and the *New York Times* is equally wary, preferring to put it in scare quotes in its editorials. It has also been seen as a major stumbling block to the peace talks or rounds of negotiations that have been held so far.⁶ Consider the arguments on both sides.

The Palestinians say that many, if not most, of the 750,000 Palestinians who left their homes in 1948 were driven out in a campaign of mass expulsion, of the type that came to be known, in the latter part of the twentieth century, as “ethnic cleansing.” They were resettled against their will in other parts of historic Palestine or in the neighboring states, principally, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. Thus, they claim that they should have a right to return to their places of origin and resume their lives, or those of their parents or grandparents, as though the *nakbah* (“catastrophe”) that befell them had never occurred. They base this on several principles derived from morality and international law. The first is a principle that disallows the use of force as a way of changing the circumstances of people’s lives against their will. Such uses of force generate a right to restore the status quo ante—at least until a just resolution can be found. Second, they say that in expelling them, Palestinians were effectively denied the right to determine their own fate in their historic homeland, a denial of the right of self-determination. Finally, they add that the events of 1948 deprived many Palestinians of their rights to property and livelihood, which should be restored to them directly by repatriating them in their homes, shops, orchards, and farmlands.⁷

Most Israelis see matters differently. For them, the war of 1948 was not characterized by a campaign of ethnic cleansing; rather, it was a matter of several Arab armies invading the fledgling state. There was no concerted effort to expel the Palestinians; those who left either did so of their own accord and on the orders of their leaders, or were made to leave in a defensive action by the Israeli armed forces or the Jewish militias that predated the establishment of the state.⁸ Second, many Israelis do not accept that the Palestinians are the indigenous inhabitants of the land, and that what is now Israel and the occupied territories was the historic homeland of the Palestinians. They therefore reject the claim of self-determination in that land. As for Palestinian property claims, they are met with a number of arguments on the Israeli side. Sometimes, they are simply dismissed as illegitimate since they applied under a legal order that no longer exists. At other times, they are met with the claim that they should be traded off against the property claims of Arab Jews who emigrated to Israel, leaving their possessions behind in places like Yemen and Morocco.⁹ At yet other times, some will concede that Palestinians may receive compensation as part of a final settlement, but not by returning their original property to them, but rather by means of funds provided by the international community. Finally, to clinch the matter, it is said that any return of Palestinians to the towns and villages in which they and their forebears once resided would “destroy the Jewish state,” which means that it would cease to be a state with a sizeable Jewish majority.

Within this tight knot of arguments and this flurry of claims and counterclaims, one can detect three main types of disagreement. The first is broadly factual in character and can in principle be settled by empirical investigations of a historical nature. In this case, reason may have a small role to play in evaluating the validity of the claims; but it cannot really settle the matter by itself—historical research is needed. As the remarks I quoted from Morris reveal, one of the leading Israeli historians of 1948—regardless of his *current* ideological or moral stance—now acknowledges that what happened during that year amounts to a campaign of ethnic cleansing. A second type of disagreement has to do with the relative moral priority of certain incompatible courses of action. Here again the Morris argument is of relevance, since it raises the question of which should take precedence—establishment of a state for the Jewish people or not expelling the Palestinian people from their homes. A type of practical reasoning is involved in settling this dispute, which would weigh the urgency of establishing a homeland for the Jews against the need not to cause long-term suffering to others. The third type of dispute involved in this aspect of the conflict entails assessing the legitimacy of some moral principles themselves—for example, the sanctity of private property, the imperative of preserving the national character of a certain state, the permissibility of the use of force to change facts on the ground, and the statute of limitations on ownership rights. These are just some of the moral principles whose very legitimacy are in dispute among the two parties to the conflict.

It would take too long to try to say what the outcome of such a process of practical reasoning might be, but it is safe to say that it would *not* be a complete denial of the right of return of the Palestinians. It seems fairly certain that substantive reason would dictate at least a qualified right of return. However, the mainstream Israeli position, as expressed by successive Israeli governments and as promulgated in the official literature of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, is simply that there is no merit at all in the Palestinian right of return. It is not clear how reason can serve to break this deadlock, given that the positions are so far apart, and that one side does not seem to allow that there is something to talk about.

If we conclude that substantive reason (including morality) dictates positions that are radically different from those adopted by Israeli officials concerning the right of return, and we are committed to a negotiated settlement to the conflict, then means-ends rationality returns to the picture, in the following guise. The question that arises for the Palestinians is: Why insist on a position on the grounds of moral principle when it is clear that there is no chance that this position will be accepted, now or in the foreseeable future, by the other party? To pose the question more generally: How rational is it to adhere to standards of morality when it is clear that those standards are not likely to be met given the prevailing power balance? Again: At what point does it become positively irrational to advocate just claims when the stronger party, backed by the world’s only superpower, declares them to be “unrealistic”—as U.S. President Bush recently did with respect to the right of return?¹⁰

This is one way of characterizing a standard debate on the Palestinian side, whereby hardliners insist on moral principle and the justice of their cause, while moderates say that politics is the art of the attainable and an insistence on morality in the face of overwhelming power is harmful to the rational self-interest of the Palestinian people. Palestinians frequently see themselves as torn between morality and rationality on the issue of the right of return and other aspects of the conflict, or perhaps between instrumental rationality and substantive rationality. But matters are somewhat more complicated, since

hardliners often respond by saying that what seems rational in the short-term is not always identical with what is rational in the long-term. This raises a kind of paradox of long-term rationality (on the analogy of the paradoxes of collective rationality): what may be a rational strategy to adopt in the here and now may not be so if one takes a long view. The point is not that what seems irrational in the short-term might turn out *in retrospect* to have been the rational course of action. Rather, it may sometimes be clear from our present perspective that it would be rational in the current political climate to insist on moral principle and wait for external circumstances and the balance of power to change, as opposed to settling for something that delivers something less than optimal justice. Unfortunately for the prospects for dialogue, it is difficult to come up with a counter-argument to this position.

Endnotes

1. I am grateful to my colleagues Bashshar Haydar and Gregg Osborne for very helpful discussions concerning the topic of this paper.
2. Sahar Tabaja, 8 March 2004, online discussion board.
3. The same student went on to say: "I am not sure dialogues are about attaining the truth anyway, it's more like different groups want to get a larger stake in the final outcome, and in that regard reason is only one tool among many." Loubna El-Amine, 11 March 2004, online discussion board.
4. The modal and deontic operators make this a more complicated argument than a simple matter of, "If *P* then *Q*, not *Q*, therefore not *P*," but I think the broader point about rationality remains.
5. Morris puts it thus: "Ben-Gurion was right. If he had not done what he did, a state would not have come into being. That has to be clear. It is impossible to evade it. Without the uprooting of the Palestinians, a Jewish state would not have arisen here." *Haaretz*, 9 January 2004.
6. I would argue that the right of return should be understood both as a collective and an individual right. It is in reality a collection of rights, partly political, partly social, and partly pertaining to individual property rights. It comprises: the right of individuals and groups not to be expelled from their homes, the right of a people to determine its own destiny in its homeland, and the right of individuals to reclaim property that has been lost or stolen.
7. I understand territorial rights in terms of individual title deeds as well as the collective rights of groups of people to reside on and make use of plots of land. Around 6% of the whole land of Palestine was in Jewish hands at the time of the U.N. partition resolution in November 1947.
8. This claim is contradicted by historical research which shows that Zionist forces deliberately emptied the land conquered in 1948 of its Palestinian population and actively prevented the return of refugees by destroying 92% of the 421 villages depopulated in 1948, either wholly or extensively. A new school of prominent Israeli historians (including Benny Morris and others) now endorses this version of events, long denied by official Zionist historiography.
9. There is no direct link between the forced expulsion of the Palestinians in 1948 and the emigration of Jews from Arab countries. Indeed, the latter was partly organized and funded by Israel after the creation of the state, and was in some instances actively encouraged by acts of intimidation carried out by agents of Israeli intelligence.
10. See U.S. President George Bush's statement on 14 April 2004.

Reason vs. Rhetoric – Who Is To Be Master?

Anat Biletzki

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Situated in a session named "Can Reason Be the Basis for Dialogue in the Middle East?", I will attempt to view a political context philosophically. Indeed, a few years ago some of the speakers assembled here today participated in another APA meeting, in another session, titled "The Possibility of Dialogue in the Middle East." At that time, we wryly remarked that perhaps it should have been called "The Impossibility of Dialogue in the Middle East"; or, at the very least, it should have ended with a question mark. Subsequently, I will admittedly be pointing here to the soon-to-be realized impossibility of dialogue in the Middle East. But I will be pointing *away* from reason—or lack thereof—as the cause of this impossibility. In other words, in a certain sense I will be challenging all—or most—of the presuppositions of this session.

First, let us begin with and identify some truisms—philosophical, political, and local truisms. Perhaps some of these truisms are not truisms at all, since they are not trivial, neither are they uncontested. Still, though not truisms, these propositions are popular slogans, clichés, and mantras, often heard, often acquiesced to, and not often submitted to critique.

Philosophical truisms abound in the discussions of reason. First among them is that of reason versus emotion: reason and emotion are two different aspects of the human experience. Reason—brother to rationality and logic—is objective and universal, whereas emotion—sister to passion and affect—is subjective and particular. Reason and emotion are opposed in a very certain sense—objective reason is optimally emotionless and strong emotions are not rationality-bound. Then there is the second pair: reason versus rhetoric. Going back to Plato, the hyper-rationalist, and his famous feud with the Sophists, the local rhetoricians, one can, instead of looking at the difference between reason and emotion, talk about the split between Philosophy (with a capital P) and Rhetoric. For it is there that an important tradition starts: the tradition that puts philosophy and rhetoric on two different sides of a fence with several "natural allies" on each side. Thus, philosophy is grouped with logic, with rational method, with universalism, with objectivism, with validity, and with truth. Rhetoric's family includes emotion, relativism, subjectivism, persuasion, and opinion. Philosophy is viewed as rational conceptual analysis; rhetoric appeals to our irrational passionate affinities. Not surprisingly then, philosophy is housed in the same general area as science (and knowledge in general), while rhetoric is given a place in public human contexts like politics (and law). Finally, when reason and rationality are grouped together, a natural contender on the "other side" is religion. So we get the third philosophical cliché: reason versus religion.

Political truisms are more local and more parochial; indeed, they are dependent on the political culture in which they abide. Still, if we facilely recognize a certain Western, liberal cultural context we can ascertain the current slogans pointing, first, at the West versus East pair, and then the rationality versus fundamentalism couple. Both of these categorizations are now popularly housed in the "clash of civilizations" ideology. And even when that superstructure is questioned, it is rarely problematized in essence. That is to say, gradations and complexities are recognized *within* the ideology. Consequently, variations on the clash-of-civilizations truism take the East to be more nuanced, and make place for