

# One Big Thing

**Justice for Hedgehogs**

*by Ronald Dworkin*

*Harvard University Press, 2011,*

*506 pages.*

*Reviewed by David Heyd*

Both the title and cover illustration of Ronald Dworkin's latest book are a humorous tribute to an animal that has achieved lofty symbolic status in the history of ideas—and to Isaiah Berlin, the renowned scholar to whom this status is due. Inspired by the proverb attributed to Archilochus, the Greek poet who lived in 700 B.C.E., "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing," Berlin distinguished, in his 1953 essay "The Hedgehog and the Fox," between two types of thinkers: the "hedgehogs"—that is, men such as Plato, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky, who enunciated a systematic worldview, a singular vision, and a fixed methodology—and the "foxes"—men such as Aristotle, Shakespeare, and Montaigne, who cultivated many

and diverse interests, were wary of dogmas and assumptions concerning the uniformity of truth and reality, and readily navigated between different systems of thought. There are many who, not unjustly, regard Berlin himself as something of a fox, largely on account of his support for value pluralism, which defies reduction to a comprehensive methodology or a single set of principles. By contrast—and as may be deduced from the title he chose for his book—Dworkin counts himself among the opposite category's members. Indeed, from the opening pages of *Justice for Hedgehogs*, Dworkin presents himself as someone who seeks to establish a consistent and sweeping system of thought, one capable of answering a wide range of questions in the fields of philosophy, morality, ethics, and law.

Dworkin, who has taught at New York University, University College London, Yale, Oxford, and other prestigious academic institutions, is unquestionably one of our generation's great philosophers of law and morality. In 1969, he succeeded H.L.A. Hart

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as chair of jurisprudence at Oxford. A pioneer in the analytical philosophy of law, Hart was among the leading proponents of legal positivism, which holds that the law acquires its validity not from the world of values, but rather from specific social facts. Dworkin rose to prominence as a rigorous critic of the positivist approach; his line of reasoning, set forth in such works as *Law's Empire* (1986), seeks to anchor legal norms in moral principles. Given this approach, it was only natural for Dworkin to broaden his interest to a systematic investigation of the sphere of values. And indeed, his work, which initially dealt with judicial discourse and liberal theory, gradually encompassed moral discussions concerning the beginning of life (abortion) and its end (euthanasia), conscientious objection, and affirmative action. Dworkin also developed a theory concerning the fundamental function of interpretation in law, politics, and ethics—one that is not dissimilar to its role in art and literature, fields that have always been close to Dworkin's heart. From there, he began to focus on linguistic philosophy and meta-ethics, disciplines regarded as particularly abstract and complicated, and which occupy a central place in the book before us.

In a way, *Justice for Hedgehogs* is a summary of a life's work, and Dworkin presents it as such. That said, al-

though many of its subjects have been discussed in his previous writings, this book also presents original arguments. Dworkin turns out to be a particularly ambitious hedgehog. In a generation of analytical philosophers who fear anything that smacks of "a system," the work's broad scholarship attests, first and foremost, to the boldness of its writer's aspirations. And this is not the book's only virtue: Dworkin has always been known for his fluent, clear, and instructive writing, and the present volume is no exception. Furthermore, in an admittedly long (perhaps even too long) book, the reader has no trouble following the author's line of thought; indeed, the Baedeker Dworkin offers in the first chapter more than enables the patient reader to follow the orderly pattern of his intricate argumentation. And while his insistence on tying all loose ends together in accordance with his grand design might come across as an almost dogmatic commitment to a single idea—some might call it stubborn single-mindedness—the result is an undeniably brilliant, challenging, and often quite convincing philosophical treatise.

It should be said up front that the book's title, *Justice for Hedgehogs*, is somewhat misleading. This is not, after all, a work about justice, even though the concept does play an

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important role in contemporary moral and political thought. Indeed, the concern with justice—that is, principles of fair distribution of resources, rights, and liberties—occupies less than one-fifth of the tome. Rather than referring to the hedgehogian concept of justice, the title in truth proclaims the author’s intention to do justice to the hedgehogian approach itself. It is in the latter’s spirit that Dworkin seeks to establish a comprehensive, systematic theory of values, binding together law, ethics, and the individual search for meaning.

One of Dworkin’s early books is titled *Taking Rights Seriously* (1977). In the present study, which expands the scope of that work, Dworkin calls upon us to take morality and ethics seriously, too. The proper way to do so, he claims, is to assume that the sphere of values, no less than that of science, is based on objective truths. Having previously asserted that every judicial problem has a correct answer, Dworkin now contends that the same rule applies to ethical dilemmas, and even to basic moral issues that crop up in our day-to-day lives. This is a radical position, and it obliges Dworkin to address and refute the skeptical arguments that have been leveled against moral philosophy from its very beginnings.

First, Dworkin rejects the external, meta-ethical skepticism that

maintains that moral judgments should not be regarded as truths, since they cannot be derived from objective facts. This stance, which relegates values to a matter of personal tastes and preferences, may prevail among philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists, but it is wholly rejected by the majority of “ordinary” people, who have time and again proved willing to stand up for what they believe to be good and right in the absolute sense. This position is also rejected by Dworkin, who dismisses any attempt to question the validity of moral discourse based on assumptions concerning the nature of reality. Values, he explains, do not need to match moral facts or properties that allegedly exist “out there.” Nor does this state of affairs in any way detract from values’ objectivity, since their justification does not depend on any external factor, whether metaphysical or sociological. “It is a familiar, perfectly ordinary idea that some acts—torturing babies for fun—are wrong in themselves, not just because people think them wrong,” he writes. Dworkin objects to the very idea that morality can be validated—or repudiated—on a non-moral basis; skepticism is itself a normative stance, and must be judged as such.

“Internal” skepticism, which arises from moral discourse itself, presents

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a more complicated challenge. This brand of skepticism does not doubt the objective validity of values, but rather the possibility of presenting adequate answers to all moral questions. Dworkin mentions a few types of internal skepticism, such as negative judgments, which remove certain matters—the appropriate manner of sexual relations between consenting adults, for example—from the purview of moral discourse; judgments that assert that sometimes there is no “correct” answer to moral disputes, on account of the indeterminacy or incommensurability of the positions on each side; and moral conflicts, in which a person is torn between two equally valid, normative obligations (the classic example, in this case, is Antigone’s dilemma). As a rule, Dworkin takes internal skepticism very seriously. He stresses that we are incapable of resolving profound moral controversies by means of irrefutable arguments. All we can do is ground our judgment in the practice of interpretation.

Indeed, since morality exists in a field of its own—i.e., independent of other fields, such as science or metaphysics—and since we cannot bootstrap ourselves out of it, all we can do is base our moral convictions on certain assumptions of value, which in turn must be assessed in light of other assumptions or beliefs within

our normative value system. Thus, the main role of interpretation in the moral sphere is to reconcile all our assumptions and beliefs so they become part of a single, comprehensive, coherent tapestry, reinforcing each other without need for external justification. In the past, Dworkin presented this kind of holistic methodology as part of his “integral” conception of law, articulated in *Law’s Empire*. There, he claimed that the judge who interprets the law must work within a vast network of legal principles and precedents set by his predecessors and colleagues. He compared a trial to a long novel, in which every chapter is written by a different author (that is, judge). The resulting narrative is thus the product of a group effort, but this fact does not detract—nor is it meant to—from its ultimate unity and coherence.

*Justice for Hedgehogs* now applies this approach to the entire realm of values. In the framework of moral and ethical discourse, we must explain abstract ideas such as “virtue,” “justice,” “liberty,” and “equality” within the concrete context of the judgments we are forced to make. We have at our disposal several methods of interpretation, each of which entails a value judgment. Let us assume, for example, that we must decide on the validity of affirmative action. Since the concept of justice itself does not

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provide us with sufficient criteria for reaching a decision, we must instead interpret the problem in the context of granting opportunities to social groups that have suffered systematic discrimination in the past. The practice of interpretation, according to Dworkin, is moral “all the way down”: Debates about such issues as fair distribution of resources or euthanasia revolve solely around values, and do not require separate conceptual analyses. These debates are indeed complicated, yet Dworkin believes that reasoned interpretation *can* produce the right answer to all the questions that arise along the way.

Interpretation, it must be noted, is not free of limitations or constraints that stem from the principle of moral responsibility. Dworkin rejects any view or action that originates in insincerity, whim, self-interest, or what he calls “moral schizophrenia” (a tendency to oscillate, without much thought, between conflicting commitments). He stresses the need to stick to one’s principles, to employ one’s powers of reasoning and reflection, and to refrain so much as possible from inconsistency. This is an endless but infinitely rewarding labor. And there is hope: Dworkin draws our attention to the fact that science has been forced to accept the possibility that our beliefs are erroneous, or that there are truths beyond our em-

pirical reach. Normative judgments, by contrast, never exceed the limits of human cognition; moral truth is thus far more accessible to us than the truth about the nature of the world.

One of the major challenges with which Dworkin contends is his attempt to combine morality and ethics into one comprehensive system. According to the accepted view in philosophy (modern philosophy, at any rate), these are two distinct, but not conflicting, fields: Ethics concerns the individual’s search for a good life, while morality deals with the duties of the individual toward his fellow man. The relationship between the good life and the moral life has been discussed at length by Thomas Nagel, Dworkin’s old colleague and friend. In his book *The View from Nowhere* (1989), Nagel posits five possible ways of articulating this relationship: defining the moral life in terms of the good life (Aristotle); defining the good life in terms of the moral life (Plato); preferring the good life to the moral life (Nietzsche); preferring the moral life to the good life (utilitarianism); and indeterminacy, i.e., the assumption that neither the good life nor the moral life consistently overrides the other. Nagel dismisses the first three possibilities and deliberates between the remaining two. In the end, like many of us who find it hard

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to choose between moral demands and the need for self-realization, he leaves the question open. Liberalism chooses separation as the solution, differentiating between the public and the private, between social morality and individual preferences.

Dworkin takes a different approach. He rejects the notion that the good life and the moral life cannot be reconciled. There is no need, he says, to come down on either side of the argument. In any given situation, we should take into account both our personal benefit and our moral obligation. After all, the life of a person who ignores moral demands cannot be a good one, while moral demands that overlook the importance of caring for the self are ultimately invalid. For Dworkin, ethics and morality converge in the concept of dignity, which reflects the value man attributes to his life. Dworkin adopts the Kantian principle that states that I cannot respect myself unless I similarly respect all of humankind. If I attach objective significance to my own life, I must recognize the objective significance of the life of others. Even if I cannot regard both my life and the life of my fellow man as equally significant, I must accept that his view is just as biased in his favor—even Kant does not expect me to be completely impartial in this respect. All that is expected of me is to respect others as I respect myself. The

specific manner in which I take the interests of the other into consideration while shaping my life is, of course, open to interpretation. Total egoism is unacceptable, but perfect altruism is equally unnecessary.

Alongside the principle of dignity, from which we derive our moral obligation to others, Dworkin sets the principle of authenticity, the source of our ethical responsibility toward our own lives. Every man must see to it that his life is a good one. This is not a privilege, but a duty. However, Dworkin differentiates between a “good life” and “living well”: While the first concept is a kind of thorough ethical assessment of our lives, the so-called net result of all we have done and all that has been done to us, the second, adverbial concept—and Dworkin’s central contribution to the philosophical discussion on the subject—signifies what he calls “the performance,” i.e., the *way* we handle the contingencies imposed upon us along the way. Obviously, a disabled person’s quality of life will be affected by his disability, but this need not negate the possibility of his living well: He can learn to cope with, and perhaps even overcome, his limitations. Here Dworkin’s position is similar to the Aristotelian view according to which the sum of the pleasure or satisfaction a person has managed to garner—attainments generally influenced by

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events beyond his control—cannot serve as the standard in evaluating a virtuous life. Rather, we should take note of the manner in which this person chooses to live his life. Virtue, Aristotle insists, does not depend on good fortune.

After unifying all aspects of the normative discourse via the concepts of dignity and authenticity, Dworkin turns to an analysis of several key problems in moral philosophy: the nature of promises, the principle of double effect, the trolley case, the limits of responsibility under natural determinism, and others. Dworkin insists that there is a correct solution to all such problems. Nevertheless, no one has privileged access to the solution. All we can do is debate these problems responsibly and present the best arguments for our case, striving to convince both ourselves and those around us of its truth. Only thus will we be able to say that we stand behind our decisions and principles; this is the only way a serious, thinking, self-respecting person can act.

One problem Dworkin addresses is that of free will: namely, is determinism, physical or metaphysical, compatible with personal responsibility, both for one's own life and for that of others? Following Kant, Dworkin asserts that determinism cannot unburden us of our responsibility for our own deeds without also precluding

our responsibility for our judgments. Moreover, if we are not responsible for our moral judgments, we are also not responsible for our scientific and philosophical judgments. However, the abdication of such intellectual responsibility is inconceivable, since it would bar us from taking seriously even the deterministic argument we are presently making.

Dworkin also objects to the assumption that we have no control over our thoughts and actions when they are determined by external factors, instead of by reflective decision making. After all, I control my mathematical judgment, even if it is the direct result of a long chain of causes, beginning with my primary-school math lessons. Against the limiting causal concept of control, Dworkin posits an alternative approach, which emphasizes the principle of capacity. According to this approach, a person is considered "in control" if he is aware of his obligation to take a stand or make a decision, if he understands that nobody else will do it for him, and if he is capable of forming real beliefs about the world and matching his choices to his normative personality. Such a person, contends Dworkin, can act in a free and responsible manner.

The last part of the book deals with politics, a field Dworkin has discussed extensively in some of his writings. This part is devoted to such

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concepts as liberty, equality, and democracy, which often conflict with one another. Dworkin criticizes the philosophical inclination to treat these notions as criterial concepts that possess a fixed meaning, and to analyze them in a “neutral” manner, detached from any concrete context. This pretension, he explains, will inevitably lead to paradox. He therefore suggests an interpretive approach that translates political concepts into practical solutions for specific situations. In so doing, he states, we may also avoid becoming embroiled in conflicts between opposing commitments. Liberty and equality, for example, are often depicted as contradictory, yet it is possible to reconcile them if they are interpreted as different aspects of the political community’s duty to preserve and protect the dignity of its members. Two fundamental principles emerge from this general obligation: the notion that a government must treat all those under its dominion with equal concern, and the expectation that it will respect the individual’s responsibility toward his own life. Neither of these principles need be waived in the process of formulating solutions to political and social problems. At the end of the day, the Dworkinian interpretative project, which embraces morality, ethics, and politics, is founded on the assumption that even

the tightest Gordian knot can be undone, if we just have enough patience and insight.

*Justice for Hedgehogs* is a grand book, both in terms of the magnitude of its mission and in the overwhelming impact of its comprehensive, watertight system. Monistic approaches are extremely attractive, since they fulfill the basic philosophical drive to investigate and understand everything down to its root causes. Indeed, one cannot but marvel at Dworkin’s remarkable mastery of philosophical, ethical, political, and legal literature, and his ability to combine the different perspectives on human life into a single theory founded on basic methodological and normative principles. The strength of this system lies in its ability to avoid foundationalism—that is to say, a commitment to metaphysical premises, the controversy over which might threaten to bring the whole structure down.

Now, it is true that Dworkin’s philosophical project rests on certain fundamentals, such as the principles of dignity and authenticity, as well as the recognition of the freedom of choice and responsibility. However, contrary to the foundationalist position, which leaves no room for discussion with those who question the system’s dogma, Dworkin *invites*

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his critics to question the essential assumptions of his system, which he presents from the outset as normative propositions that are in themselves part of the values polemic. This sort of holism, or coherentism, enjoys a great philosophical advantage, as it makes it difficult for us to criticize both the details and the big picture: In the first case, we have to show how one or another claim might be corrected without damaging the unity and consistency of the whole, while in the second case, in which we reject the system *in toto*, we face the enormous challenge of proposing an alternative philosophical view founded on different principles.

The fox is a wily, swift, and elusive animal. The hedgehog is slow and methodical, but always prepared to protect itself against attack: It folds it into an impenetrable ball. Dworkin's system is like the latter—for better or worse. The interpretative method ensures an ongoing rational discussion, one that cannot be stunted by any authoritative or dogmatic assumption. It is, however, unclear how this discussion ought to be conducted, since Dworkin rejects any attempt to use concepts as definitive criteria that limit a given argument. In his opinion, when we debate whether affirmative action is

a just policy in the context of accepting minority groups into universities, we must begin with abstract concepts such as “justice” and “equality,” and subject them to a process of interpretation. The problem is that this process is not bound by any essential, pre-existing conditions (apart from the few formal requirements mentioned above). The discussion would be conducted completely differently way if its basic premises stemmed from an Aristotelian or a Rawlsian view, which regarded “justice” not as an abstract concept, but rather as a principle that clearly delimits its range of interpretation and application. A debate of this sort would at least be relatively structured, compared to the loose interpretive deliberation Dworkin proposes.

Dworkin's general outlook is one of disarming optimism. He believes in rationality, in the power of persuasion, and in man's tireless efforts to justify his value judgments and positions. All things are open to discussion, all questions can be examined, and all hypotheses can be validated as we constantly move toward the correct answer. This possibility of ongoing discussion relies on Dworkin's theory regarding the independence of values from our perceptions of the natural world; all the

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resources necessary for moral inquiry are ostensibly at man's fingertips.

In his optimism, however, Dworkin might be overlooking the tragic aspect of human existence. Kant, by whom Dworkin is profoundly influenced, once said that two things fill him with wonder and endless admiration: "The starry sky above me and the moral law within me." Dworkin draws much encouragement from man's moral aptitude, which grants him infinite value as a creature of dignity and responsibility. At the same time, Dworkin seems to ignore the sense of nothingness inspired by the "starry sky": the vast distances of time and space in which we occupy the most marginal of places. This sense gives rise to the experience of the absurd described by the existentialists—and by some of Dworkin's philosophical rivals, such as Nagel. Dworkin is not daunted by the challenge of endowing human existence

with meaning in a physical and biological world that is in itself devoid of purpose. Perhaps he is right in arguing that it is sufficient for us to be able to shape our lives in accordance with a plan for which we are responsible, and that we need no metaphysical support for our ethical project. But Dworkin himself has repeatedly stated that the waste of human life, and certainly the end of humankind, is a catastrophic scenario—thus placing himself, almost unwillingly, in the position of a spectator. It thus appears that even anthropocentric philosophers like Dworkin are not immune to the universal aspiration to self-transcendence. Even hedgehogs now and then want to lift their snouts from their bellies and raise their eyes to the heavens.

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# A Remorseless Apology

**The Arabs and the Holocaust:  
The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives**  
*by Gilbert Achcar*

*Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and  
Company, 2009,  
386 pages.*

*Reviewed by Boaz Neumann*

From the Israelis' point of view—and most Jews would probably agree—Holocaust denial is the worst of all possible affronts. Not only was the Holocaust an unspeakable tragedy for its victims, a catastrophic event whose memory remains fresh in our collective consciousness. For many, both in Israel and abroad, the Holocaust is perceived as the *ultima ratio* of the State of Israel—even if, from a historical standpoint, Zionist activism preceded it by several decades.

This reductive cause-and-effect may explain the prevalence of Holocaust denial in Muslim countries. After all, recognition of the Jewish people's darkest hour of suffering would make the sweeping rejection of Zionism

somewhat difficult. Clearly, it's much easier to dismiss the entire matter as a monstrous sham. And there's no need to go all the way to Tehran to come across this kind of thinking: In May 2009, sociologist Sammi Smooha of the University of Haifa published a survey showing that 40 percent of Israeli Arabs believe—or at least claim to believe—that the Holocaust never took place. In this case, at least, it's hard to attribute the findings to ignorance or indoctrination: The respondents all studied in Israeli schools, and were well acquainted with the subject. The only plausible explanation for their position, then, is a deep-seated animosity toward the Jewish state and its founding narrative.

The powerful emotions evoked by the Holocaust make the raging “war of narratives” between Israelis and Arabs particularly explosive, and a challenge to scholars attempting to confront the topic in depth. Gilbert Achcar, a scholar of Lebanese descent and a lecturer at the School for Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, has nonetheless decided

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to take on the formidable task. Given his previous publications and radical political activism, Achcar is clearly unafraid to tackle controversial issues. In 2006, together with Noam Chomsky, he wrote *Perilous Power*, a harsh indictment of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, and in 2007, in collaboration with Israeli activist Michel Warschawski (Mikado) of the now-defunct Marxist Revolutionary Communist League, he published a book on the last IDF campaign in Lebanon, titled *The 33-Day War*. His most recent work, *The Arabs and the Holocaust*, deals with an even more explosive topic, and seeks to refute certain views that consistently crop up in the heated debate surrounding it. This is certainly a worthy endeavor, but Achcar's arguments are bound to infuriate readers expecting a fair—or, at the very least, honest—discussion of such a sensitive issue.

Achcar's book is divided into two parts. Part I, "The Time of the Shoah," discusses Arab reactions to the rise of modern European antisemitism and the appearance of Nazism. Significantly, Achcar emphasizes that one can speak not of a single reaction, but rather of reactions, since the Arab world does not constitute a monolithic entity. He rightly points out that this world is a complex and

layered realm that engendered various responses to the Holocaust, each of which calls for a separate discussion. Nevertheless, Achcar identifies four fundamental positions that existed side by side throughout the 1930s and 1940s, and that shaped the Arab attitude toward antisemitism, Nazism, and the Holocaust: the Western-liberal approach, the Marxist perspective, the nationalist view, and, finally, the fundamentalist, pan-Islamic ideology.

Arab adherents to the Western-liberal approach renounced European antisemitism almost categorically, and completely rejected National Socialism. Their vehement opposition to Zionism stemmed not from animosity toward the Jews, but instead from an anti-colonialist stance. Arab liberals held that there was no reason Palestine's Arabs should have to pay the price for the persecution of Jews in Europe; one injustice should not be corrected by bringing about another. Some went so far as to show solidarity with the oppressed Jews in the name of universal human values, seeing in Nazism a far greater threat than even Zionism.

Arab Marxists tended to identify Zionism—which they perceived as a form of fascism and racism—with Nazism. The comparison between the two movements was predicated

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not only on the familiar arguments of orthodox Marxism, but also on a series of so-called proofs: Zionism and Nazism both believed in the existence of a distinct Jewish *volk*; during the initial years following the Nazis' rise to power, they maintained contacts with the Zionists, liaisons that culminated in the Haavara (Transfer) Agreement of 1933; and, finally, certain right-wing Zionist circles even expressed sympathy—albeit short-lived—for Italian fascism. Still, Marxist Arabs renounced antisemitism, particularly since some of their associates were themselves Jews who spoke out strongly against Zionism.

Arab nationalism, by contrast, took the opposite approach. The nationalist parties that popped up in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon during the 1930s were directly inspired by the fascist movements of Europe. Indeed, they sought to imitate them: the Syrian Social-Nationalist Party, founded in 1932, was a Lebanese replica of the Nazi Party; the Lebanese Phalanges, founded by Pierre Gemayel in 1932, were modeled on the Spanish Falanges; and the Young Egypt Party, formed in 1933, operated a youth movement called the Green Shirts—a local version of the German *Sturmabteilung* (Stormtroopers).

Nonetheless, Achcar claims, Arab nationalist sympathy for Nazi

Germany was motivated not by an ideological affinity, but rather by the expectation that the Third Reich would prove an ally in the struggle against the despised Britain and France. Iraqi Prime Minister Rashid Aali al-Gaylani asked for German and Italian assistance after he was deposed in January 1941 only because he was an anti-imperialist who sought to halt the British takeover of his land. Meanwhile, Young Egypt activists, including future president Anwar Sadat, were anxiously waiting for Rommel, who was then racing toward Cairo; from their perspective, he was not a representative of Nazism, but rather a savior, who would liberate Egyptians from the yoke of British occupation.

In a similar vein, Achcar claims that antisemitism was not a substantial component of Arab nationalism. Anti-Jewish sentiment originated, in general, in the hatred of those foreign forces that had taken over Arab lands, of which the Zionists were but one of many. Indeed, the Independence Party (al-Istiqlal) of Palestine, which was formed in 1932 and led the Great Arab Revolt of 1936-1939, saw the Mandate government as its main adversary; the conflict with the Zionists was merely part of the larger campaign against the British.

Pan-Islamism, which emerged as a political force with the rise of the

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Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928, was characterized from the very beginning by extreme anti-Zionism, to which caustic antisemitic elements were added during the 1930s. The theologians and preachers of radical Islam could not outright adopt the Nazi doctrine, whose precepts were foreign to their own. Yet they were certainly sympathetic to Hitler's Germany, which they perceived as an instrument in the service of Allah. They hoped it would fulfill the divine mission of eradicating all infidels—including, obviously, the Jews.

The second and more developed half of the book, "The Time of Nakba," focuses on the period after the founding of the Jewish state. Here Achcar attempts to analyze the Arab perception of the Holocaust, primarily the ways in which it changed in response to the Palestinians' national tragedy in 1948. He claims that during the 1950s, the Arabs by and large came to recognize the great catastrophe that befell the Jews, even as they rejected the notion that this disaster justified the Zionist endeavor in general, and the crime of the "Nakba" in particular. The Arab attitude changed, however, as the Holocaust began to assume a central role in Israeli ideology. The enormous dissonance between the Jewish state's growing military might and the rhetoric of victimhood it adopted—the Israeli invasion of

Lebanon in 1982 is a prime example of this phenomenon—only strengthened the Arabs' suspicion that the Zionists were blatantly manipulating the historical record. Their empathy for the suffering of the persecuted was thus replaced by a refusal to accept the "Jewish version" of the Holocaust, or even the very fact of its occurrence. The military and diplomatic conflict between Israel and the Arabs now came to encompass another struggle: a bitter "war of narratives."

Achcar's book makes a worthwhile contribution to both the historical and historiographical discourse surrounding the question of Arab attitudes toward the Holocaust. In the heat of the controversy over the issue, many scholars end up spouting clichés; Achcar makes a commendable effort to avoid falling into that trap. For instance, he refutes, convincingly, the static and homogenous image of the "Arab world," portraying it instead as a complex tapestry made up of many distinct threads, each subject to change over time. Achcar also shows how the different positions taken up by Arabs as a response to European antisemitism and the Holocaust were informed by disparate motivations. At times they are driven by pure ideology, at times by realpolitik considerations, and at times by simple ad-hoc opportunism.

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Yet *The Arabs and the Holocaust* is first and foremost an exercise in apologetics. This fact is readily apparent not just in the book's contents, but also in its tone. In many places, for example, Achcar strays from a captivating historical discussion to indulge in arcane, tedious jousting with other scholars, quoting the objects of his criticism at length. Moreover, he displays an unfortunate tendency to append to the names of the researchers he quotes descriptions that fit his assessment of them. For example, Achcar has harsh words for Meir Litvak and Esther Webman, whose 2009 book *From Empathy to Denial: Arab Responses to the Holocaust* addresses the same topic, albeit from a more critical angle. He makes a point of reminding the reader at every turn that the authors are a pair of "Israeli academics affiliated with Tel Aviv University's Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies," a clear hint that the integrity of their work is compromised by their place of employment. (Full disclosure: I, too, am a faculty member of the Department of History at Tel-Aviv University.) On the other hand, when he mentions the controversial Israeli thinker Yeshayahu Leibowitz, and his opprobrious description of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 as a "Judeo-Nazi" policy, Achcar describes him as an "eminent scholar and philosopher."

A more substantial—and fatal—flaw is Achcar's historiographical framing of his analysis. In the first few pages, Achcar declares that the formative moment in the history of Zionism, and especially that of the State of Israel, was the Nazi rise to power in 1933. He bases this claim on demographics: While from 1882 to 1931 a total of 187,000 immigrants arrived in the Land of Israel, from 1932 to 1948 more than 313,000 Jews "poured into the country," including some 80,000 Holocaust survivors. In 1932, Jews accounted for 18 percent of the population, whereas by 1946 that figure had shot up to 35 percent. Based on this dramatic increase, a direct result of the persecution of the Jews in Europe, Achcar concludes that the Zionist state owed its creation to the Holocaust.

Now, the selection of these periods as historically significant is not, in and of itself, illegitimate. Achcar can, for example, claim that the Holocaust began in 1933; a fair number of historians—Israelis among them—hold similar views. But other approaches are also worthy of note: Many scholars, for instance, believe the Holocaust began at the earliest in the late 30s, if not the early 40s. If they are right, this greatly weakens Achcar's thesis regarding the Holocaust's demographic "contribution" to the Zionist enterprise. Regrettably,

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instead of backing his argument with a serious discussion of the pertinent research and alternative perspectives, he cleaves to a single, limited, and problematic possibility, merely because it supports the claim that Nazism, the Holocaust, Zionism, and the soon-to-be Jewish state are inextricably intertwined. It goes without saying that in doing so, Achcar categorically overlooks the fact that the Zionist project got its start not in the 1930s, but at least five decades earlier.

Achcar's political leanings also color his methodology, unintentionally doing an injustice to the Arabs themselves. While the Zionists (like the Western colonialists) are presented in the book as active historical subjects, the Arabs generally appear as passive objects. Indeed, in the few instances in which they are described as having acted, as opposed to having been acted upon, Achcar uses various exercises in apologetics to explain their choices. It is in this vein that he presents Arab antisemitism as merely a faded imitation of the European original, and a reaction to foreign aggression. Until the West's violent intrusion into the region, Achcar explains, the Jews were treated with tolerance and respect by their Arab neighbors. It was only after the arrival of the colonial powers that relations between the Muslim population and the Jewish minority, which adopted

Western mores, soured. In the early 1920s, tempers flared even more on account of the national dispute over the question of Palestine; from there, the situation only deteriorated.

Achcar describes at length the West's and the Zionists' brutal treatment of the Palestinians. On the other hand, he barely makes any mention of Arab violence, let alone of the Palestinian sort. True, he devotes several paragraphs to the Farhud, the infamous Iraqi pogrom of June 1941, but attributes the bloodbath to a handful of agitated marauders, insisting that most of the Arabs in the area objected to the massacre, and came to the Jewish victims' aid. (The fact that similar mayhem took place throughout the Arab world during this period seems to have slipped Achcar's memory.) Unfortunately, Achcar employs a different standard when it comes to violence by Jews, refusing, for instance, to acknowledge that the massacre perpetrated by the militant Zionist groups Etzel and Lehi against the Arab village of Dir Yassin was an act by a minority. To his credit, he does quote historian Benny Morris, who notes this was not a crime on the scale of Srebrenica. Then again, did anyone think otherwise?

But by far the most blatant instance of methodological distortion is Achcar's portrayal of Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Muslim clergyman

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who led the Palestinians during the British mandate. He opens the eyebrow-raising discussion with the claim that al-Husseini's historical significance has been blown way out of proportion in an attempt to position him near the top of "contemporary demonology's hit parade." In truth, argues Achcar, Amin al-Husseini was never a particularly important or accepted leader; rather, he was the handiwork of British colonialism. As evidence, Achcar reminds us that al-Husseini was appointed mufti of Jerusalem in 1921 by none other than High Commissioner Herbert Samuel, a Jew and a Zionist who was among the "architects" of the Balfour Declaration. This, Achcar stresses, was just one of a series of controversial appointments that divided the Palestinian public and prevented it from creating its own authoritative and unified leadership. True, Achcar does not point explicitly to "a British-Zionist conspiracy," but it is clear that he wishes his readers to reach certain conclusions on their own.

Though appointed to his post by the Mandate government, Haj Amin al-Husseini was not exactly an exemplar of cooperation. The British initially tolerated his concerted anti-Jewish activities, but their patience wore thin when he stood at the vanguard of the Great Arab Revolt of 1936. The murder of the district

commissioner of the Galilee, Lewis Yelland Andrews, in September 1937 was the last straw. The British authorities' attempts to arrest the mufti failed, and merely helped glorify him among Palestinians. Al-Husseini fled the country and, following a failed coup d'état against the British in Iraq, took refuge in Germany. The romance between him and the Third Reich, which had begun to bud in 1933, now burst into full bloom. The Palestinian leader took an active part in Nazi propaganda, even helping form Muslim units in his patron's service. Achcar merely emphasizes that these units were generally small and peripheral, certainly in comparison to the number of Arabs recruited into the British Army.

But the apologetics don't stop there: Haj Amin al-Husseini's request that the Nazis block Jewish immigration to Palestine was perfectly reasonable, says Achcar, since it reflected the Palestinian interest; what made this demand illegitimate was only the fact that it was directed toward the Nazis rather than the British. It's a questionable argument, to say the least. The mufti was well aware of the destruction of European Jewry, which Achcar readily acknowledges. Regardless of who was shutting the doors to refuge, the result would have been the same: a death sentence for millions of Jews.

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Indeed, the mufti was not satisfied merely with a request to close the gates of Palestine to European Jews. He also implored the Germans to send them to the death camps in Poland. Achcar is unable, and therefore does not try, to defend al-Husseini on this point. Indeed, he states explicitly that the Palestinian leader's conduct was abhorrent. However, quoting from the mufti's memoirs, he accepts the latter's explanation that collaboration with Germany was carried out only in order to bring about the demise of Zionism. Haj Amin al-Husseini, Achcar writes, "was telling the truth when he said that he did not embrace National Socialist doctrine." It remains unclear what Achcar is trying to achieve with this gratuitous interpretation. Even if there is something to it, and the mufti really wasn't beguiled by Nazi ideology, but merely a loyal servant of Hitler's regime—even then, what difference would it make?

Likewise, Achcar bends over backward when explaining the conduct of another present-day Islamist, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In Part II of the book, he analyzes Ahmadinejad's position vis-à-vis the Jews, breaking it down into three fundamental claims: First, the Holocaust is a myth. Second, Holocaust deniers have the right to express their opinion, and it is morally unacceptable for the West to silence them. Third,

and finally, even if the Holocaust did occur, Muslims were not responsible for it and should not have to pay the price for it; the obligation to compensate the Jews for the injustice done to them rests on the shoulders of Europe alone. Based on the third argument, Achcar concludes that Ahmadinejad is not a Holocaust denier in the strict sense—at most, he sees it as "unconfirmed hypothesis"—but rather a provocateur, trying to strip away the mask of Western hypocrisy. This conclusion begs the question: What does the author of *The Arabs and the Holocaust* stand to gain by defending a man who doubts that the Jews were the victims of genocide, and in the same breath threatens to condemn them to a similar fate?

I'm convinced that Achcar is familiar, to a certain degree, with the history of Zionism and of the State of Israel. Yet although he presents a nuanced and sophisticated depiction of Arab conduct, he refuses to do the same for the Jews. Of course, Achcar has the right to hold anti-Israeli views—which he indeed articulates throughout the book—but the account he sets forth is flagrantly biased. He portrays Zionists as war criminals who unleash their wrath on Arabs because of the suffering the Germans brought upon the Jews, and the Palestinians, in turn, as victims of Israelis—and indirectly of the Nazis

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as well. One side invades, occupies, and slaughters ruthlessly; the other is pushed into a corner, defends itself, and fights to restore its lost honor. But a serious scholarly work cannot sketch such a slanted and simplistic portrait.

The book ends in an unexpected, even bizarre way. The concluding chapter opens with a quote from Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*:

Good sense is, of all things among men, the most equally distributed.... And in this it is not likely that all are mistaken; the conviction is rather to be held as testifying that the power of judging aright and of distinguishing truth from error, which is properly what is called good sense or reason, is by nature equal in all men; and that the diversity of our opinions, consequently, does not arise from some being endowed with a larger share of reason than others, but solely from this, that we conduct our thoughts along different ways, and do not fix our attention on the same objects.

Achcar readily embraces Descartes' praise of reason, and expresses his own hope that this commonality will enable Arabs and Muslims on one hand, and Israelis and Jews on the other, to overcome the national, religious, and ethnic barriers that currently divide them. This optimistic conclusion to such a morbid book seems almost detached from reality. After all, Achcar has just described, over hundreds of pages, the venomous hatred, the antiquated views, and the fanatical ideologies that have rendered the Israeli-Arab conflict an open wound that won't stop bleeding. Is "common sense" enough to put a halt to all this? Perhaps it would be best, for now, to aim for a more modest goal: a commitment to the truth.

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