

*Philosophical Reflections on
the Israeli-Palestinian War*

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LECTURE I. OF HEDGEHOGS, FOXES, AND SWANS

We come to expect many things that happen around us to be normal occurrences or events, such as the sun's rising in the morning when we wake up, and we have learned how to become adept at dealing with our expectations, such as what to prepare for the lunch box our kids will be taking with them to school that morning. Likewise, for many of us in the region of the world where I come from—whether Israeli soldiers manning roadblocks or Palestinian students setting out to their schools—the *state of war* that exists has come to be regarded as a normal political condition that one expects to still find “out there” each morning as one wakes up, and to which one has learned to adapt. Indeed, for nearly 70 percent of the relevant Palestinian population, that is, all those aged forty-one years and younger living in East Jerusalem, the rest of the West Bank, and Gaza, or more than two million people, waking up to occupation is as much an entrenched part of normal life as waking up to the familiar surroundings of one's home and hometown, for the simple fact they have never known another reality. And similarly the case, needless to say, for the counterpart Israeli population. Of course, one may like or dislike what one wakes up to, or even ignore it; either way, one comes to simply expect and accept its immanence, just as one expects to wake up, or expects and accepts eventual death.

As I said, we adapt ourselves to our expectations, and the rich variety of the “lunch boxes” we prepare reveals our resourcefulness: each morning, we wake up ready to occupy the little daytime holes we've dug up for ourselves as ways of coping with the world around us—for example, as party leaders or army generals or peace activists or militant warriors, or simply as travelers or tourists—as day after day the state of war around us becomes more and more an entrenched part of our natural landscape, visibly even more permanent, as everyone can see with their own eyes, than the hills being plowed down with bulldozers to make way for new superhighways and settlements.

Our region, of course, is not the only one in the world afflicted by tragic conflict, or misery, whether resulting from war, food scarcity, disease, or skewed politics. But ours, more than other places perhaps, is a region where God's handiwork is most cited, Jerusalem being where man's history begins, and where it ends. It is perhaps for this particular reason that one wonders, in Jerusalem more than anywhere else, as one tries to understand what is happening around one—especially given the tragic

shortfall of reasonableness¹ and compassion—whether in fact one can really understand anything at all, as it is also here more than anywhere else that one wonders, if not acting on specific God orders, whether one can make a difference to what’s happening.

But why should I bother to understand what’s happening, less so to worry about making a difference to it, you may well ask. After all, there’s so much else in the world to be occupied with, pursuits that are far more interesting, perhaps, as well as rewarding. Well, the answer pure and simple is less an intellectual curiosity about the world as it is a sense of revulsion toward war—especially as this has dominated my (small) world for, literally, the entire duration of my life. You have to be blind, or totally insensitive, living in the midst of human turmoil, and suffering in one way or another from it, not to be inescapably caught up in it. On first impulse, of course, one assumes one can always choose to step outside. But one quickly discovers one cannot really, in the general sense, “step outside,” and that, wherever one is, one will always be confronted with occurrences or events of such a nature that the challenge will always exist to find out why such things happen the way they do, and whether one could rid the world of them, making it a better place to live in.

Therefore the pursuit of why war happens. And the first thing that struck me as I began thinking about this question, given that I have lived in a state of war for the entirety of my life, was whether our use of language was not itself skewed. Perhaps, I told myself, given that it is war that seems like a permanent feature, rather than peace, what I should be seeking to find out is why peace happens, when and if it does, not why war happens, or why wars happen.²

1. *Versus* Reason, and *contra* Radicalism, being a mental disposition to avoid excess, whether in being prejudiced in favor of one’s own views or against those of others. I was first alerted to the special significance of this particular derivation of the word when I was asked to respond to the comments made by Pope Benedict on Islam in the University of Regensburg. See my “Violenza: Razionalità e Ragionevolezza,” in *Dio Salvi La Ragione*, by Pope Benedetto XVI et al. (Sienna: Cantagalli, 2007). An English version can be located at my Web site, sari.alquds.edu. The pope’s comments seemed to uphold the view that a generic difference exists between Islam and (Judeo-)Christianity, the latter being deeply rooted in Greek “civilization” (especially that aspect of it which is rationality), unlike the former, which seems to be inherently (and historically) prone to the use of violence rather than reason.

2. One reason “peace” occurs only in the singular, it might be argued, has to do with the general supposition that it refers to what is (or ought to be?) a natural, and therefore more permanent, political state or human condition. Wars, in contrast, *break out*, or happen, or occur, and so on. “Health,” as opposed to “illness” or “disease,” seems to function in the same way, thus explaining the rationale of our quest for diagnosing a particular disease or illness rather than health itself. But the point being made here is that—given the contrary situation one finds in the world, and the immanence of war rather than peace in human affairs—the real analogy

It is a short distance, let me point out, if indeed I need to, once one starts thinking this way, to begin wondering whether one understands why anything at all—not just war or peace—happens. And from there, it is an even shorter distance to finding oneself wondering in the end if—echoing the words of Bob Dylan in his “Ballad of a Thin Man”—one knows at all *what* is happening, or what *anything* really is!

Let me assure you that this journey is not one likely to be undertaken by Bob Dylan fans only. It is pandemic! After all, how can we even begin to speculate on why something happens if we are uncertain about what that something is. However, I hasten to add that mine was not, I hope, and as I have already pointed out, an idle epistemic pursuit. It was, and remains, a practical pursuit: the search for that skill—if human nature indeed allows for it—by which humans can end, and even prevent, wars from happening. If you like, I could sum up my saga (my philosophy) by saying one is first stimulated to look at the world in order to appreciate its complexity, an altogether different, and humbler, task, I would like to suggest, than to know it; so as to appreciate, second, one’s place or role in it; so as, finally, to try to make an impact on it or to change it (and in so doing, hopefully, and as part of the bargain, to change—or improve?—oneself as well!).

This knowledge-appreciation distinction I just made in passing may have something to do with approach: whether one’s approach, and accompanying assumption, is that of a historian seeking preset answers to be discovered (on the basis of which perhaps to dispense, or to refrain from dispensing, moral judgment), or of a political animal seeking to work out solutions to problems. And in anticipation of what I shall mostly focus on in my next lecture in this context, let me just add that this latter approach relies fundamentally, I shall argue, on the role of what one might call “secular faith,” or faith in our capabilities as political agents.

But let me begin with the phenomenon of black swans.³ By “black swan” Taleb loosely refers, in his book by the same name, to that unpredictable occurrence that has the radical effect of wholly transforming our

with the health situation would be to say that asking why wars happen is the wrong question, just as asking this of health. Health, one could argue, can be defined only negatively as the absence of disease, the latter being analyzable on a case-by-case basis, with each disease having a unique diagnosis. Likewise, it could be said, war is nothing more than the absence of peace, the latter being just one or another kind of political agreement or contract between parties, also subject to diagnosis, but one that is carried out in this case with a view to reinforcing rather than eliminating that condition.

3. The following discussion draws on N.N. Taleb, *The Black Swan* (New York: Random House, 2007), in which he uses the example of discovering black swans in Australia to indicate the limitation of the inductive method in making or reaching general conclusions.

knowledge as well as our lives—whether in one fell swoop, like major wars or financial crashes, or in stages, like computer technology. Major historical developments, he contends, are brought about by such black swans, which are by their nature unpredictable. Interestingly, Taleb, who also refers passingly to *The Hedgehog and the Fox*⁴ (Isaiah Berlin's commentary on Tolstoy's *War and Peace*) in the course of his explanation of the black swan phenomenon, was first inspired to think about this phenomenon—or the sudden collapse of seemingly well-entrenched patterns and regularities through the occurrence of such an unpredictable event—as he witnessed as a young child the sudden volcanic eruption of life in Lebanon during the civil war of 1973. Wars, in other words, or sudden civil breakdowns, jolted him into a black-swan mode of thinking long before his Wall Street career brought him face-to-face with financial crashes, and to his eventual speculations on randomness and its calibrations. Fundamentally, the civil war in Lebanon was a black swan because (1) it was unpredictable, and (2) its radical effect on life in Lebanon was irreversible. But what does “unpredictable” mean here? Does it mean “not predetermined,” or, in other words, that “it could have been otherwise,” that is, a free-floating possibility, partially or totally disconnected from parallel or earlier occurrences in the world, and whose instantiation in reality was therefore totally accidental? Or does it mean “one that is predetermined, but whose determinability is a function of its connection to such an infinity of parallel and earlier events that the human mind cannot possibly encompass or fully fathom, let alone draw upon in order to extrapolate that specific outcome”?

If we went by the first meaning, this would seem to tell us that the Lebanese civil war that erupted in 1973 was so disconnected from earlier and parallel events, in the region or the world, that even the very idea of trying to preempt it would not have occurred to anyone as a serious project. It was such a free-floating, disconnected possibility that its instantiation in reality was in retrospect therefore—paradoxically—unavoidable by any conscious design! If we went by the second meaning, all this would tell us is that, underneath the appearance of peaceful regularity in Lebanese

4. Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (1953; reprint, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1988). This was, for more than one reason, the inspiring work I had intended to introduce my lectures with, addressing the determinist-nondeterminist views of history. However, I later chanced on Taleb's “swan,” which, besides invoking the issues of determinism and predictability, also draws upon the Greek notion of atomism, which I decided was also useful as a tool to explain my views in these two lectures. The reference a few paragraphs above to “dispensing moral judgment” picks up a major concern Isaiah Berlin (as well as Tolstoy) deals with in discussing history.

life, unnoticed events were slowly and cumulatively unfolding, whose inevitable direction was the outbreak of the civil war. In both cases, we note, human agency seems to count for no more than being yet another conduit through which whatever was bound to happen indeed did so, or whatever will happen will indeed do so!

It is not my purpose here to impute one or another interpretation to Taleb's use of "unpredictability," though, if pressed, I would suggest that as a self-styled skeptical empiricist his advice to us is to continue pushing our use of empirical data and mathematical models in our pursuit of knowledge to the limit, while on the one hand being aware of the pitfall of induction (that is, of being proved wrong with the discovery of new evidence), and on the other hand keeping an eye out for the totally unexpected, whose effect on our lives, whether positive or negative, can be literally immeasurable.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the earliest major influences on Taleb's thinking in this regard was what seemed to him to be the sudden and unexpected eruption of the civil war in Lebanon.⁵ History does not walk, as he put it. It *jumps!* Reaching out for metaphors that might help explain these sudden jolts, Taleb draws on the world schemes of such early Greek atomists as Epicurus, for whom historic changes were brought about by the erratic swerves of otherwise free-falling atoms, as later elaborated to us by Lucretius in his *De Rerum Natura*.⁶ The image that is brought to mind here is that of tiny droplets of water erratically shooting off sideways from a free waterfall, or swerving suddenly as they fall, causing a break in the pattern through their collision with other free-falling drops. Without such swerves, nothing in the free-falling pattern changes, and nothing

5. I believe that my commentator, Avishai Margalit, succeeded in showing us in his presentation after my lecture that Taleb's view of past Lebanese history was not nearly as idyllic as he believed: in actual fact, Margalit argued, the civil war Taleb used as a black-swan example was anything but uncommon. Ethnic and religious strife has been a recurring feature of that history from time immemorial, so to speak. But Margalit's point, while true, is beside the other point I was (and am) trying to make, which is that whether it is that civil war, or any other seemingly sudden and totally odd or "out-of-place" occurrence, a case could be made for Taleb's use of the expression "a black swan," and what that would mean: that is, whether the occurrence being talked about is unpredictable only or is indeterminable.

6. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, translated by W.E. Leonard, available at http://classics.mit.edu/Caurus/nature_things.html. From a "physics" point of view, the *atomist* tradition in Greek thought, associated with such pre-Socratics as Democritus and Epicurus, vied with the later Aristotelian tradition on the indivisibility of matter. The atomists believed the universe was made up of ultimate, *sui generis*, building blocks, which, without the sudden "bumps" that made one atom clash with another, producing a "new" combination, would have left the universe "unmade" (and would unmake it if such swerves simply stopped happening). As we shall see below, Muslim atomists used this principle to expound their theory of *constant creation*, as well as of *miracles*.

new therefore—such as war, for example—happens. Indeed, nothing at all *happens*, that is, comes into being, or into existence.

Writing in the entirely different context of art and society, Joan Retallack draws on those same Epicurean *swerves* to try to explain how radical leaps in our lives occur, from which she draws inspiration for what she calls an artist's "poethical wager."⁷ A poethical wager is not just an interruption in a physical pattern leading to the formation of something new in the physical world: it is also a courageous conscious leap, undertaken at great risk by the artist, leading to the production of a new paradigm in the creative arts. A swerve defined that way and seen from the point of view of an agent will definitely be different from how it would seem (and be seen) at the receiving end. On the receiving end, the generic break with an established pattern, in art or history or nature, must awaken a sense of wonder akin only to that normally evoked by a miracle, or a disaster.

The Lebanese case (as Taleb presented it) was an example of an unforeseen disaster. First, one has a long-standing pattern of conviviality between different ethnic and religious groups, and suddenly a human crash occurs that blows a thousand years of fruitful coexistence into a thousand splinters. One finds oneself, as in Taleb's case, abruptly catapulted into a confused state of mind, first seeking an answer to why that happens, but possibly also being driven to seek further why what happens in fact happens.

Likewise, Berlin tells us of Tolstoy, the latter's "interest in history... seems to have arisen not from interest in the past as such, but from the desire to penetrate to first causes, to understand how and why things happen as they do and not otherwise."⁸ Tolstoy's aim from understanding history and causes, as Berlin tells us, was eventually to determine the answer to what were described as those "accursed questions" that haunt the conscientious man, such as what, in life, he ought to do. Again, therefore, Tolstoy's was not an idle epistemic pursuit. There is, notwithstanding the fatalistic tenor especially in the first and second epilogues of *War and Peace*, an incredible symphony of seemingly discordant ideas on the philosophy of history and the role of the human will dispersed throughout that work which may leave readers of Tolstoy with a sense of uncertainty as to his views, an uncertainty that prompted Berlin to describe him—drawing on an ancient Greek proverb—as an aspiring hedgehog who is a fox at heart! The idea is that a hedgehog's perspective is unitary (one answer exists—

7. Joan Retallack, *The Poethical Wager* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).

8. Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, 10.

for example, God or class struggle or a complex interplay of mysterious forces as the prime mover of history), while a fox's is pluralistic. In terms of the two meanings of unpredictability we encountered, the first, of diffuse possibilities, may be how the fox sees the world, while the second, of a deep-seated though undiscoverable single undercurrent, may be how the hedgehog views it. From Taleb's perspective, one has to keep a fox's eye out for the sudden materialization of black swans in our lives!

But is a black swan really a black swan, and is history's course really defined by sudden jolts and jumps, or is it instead defined, as we normally assume it to be, by steady—even if sometimes turbulent—saunters? And, expanding our purview further afield, do these sudden jolts and jumps happen by themselves? Or do they happen by a conscious act—for example, through the brazen risk taking and creative work of avant-garde artists—as Joan Retallack, using the same image of swerving atoms, suggests? Or, should we see them, as Hannah Arendt argues, as being akin to what she calls those “infinitely improbable” occurrences in the world of nature, which are brought about in human life only through faith and courage?⁹ As we shall see in the next lecture, all these questions evoke another dimension of foxes and hedgehogs, a dimension relating knowledge to action, and contrasting, in this context, between the actor and the bystander. But meantime, and assuming there is indeed a distinction between swerves and saunters as was pointed out, let us consider how this would express itself in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In a public debate in Tel Aviv last year between two highly conscientious Israeli mavericks,¹⁰ Uri Avneri and Ilan Pappé, a comment by the former—relevant to jumping atoms and black swans—caught my attention. Pappé's contention (like Meron Benvenisti's twenty years before him, and since)¹¹ was that all the signs indicate that a two-state solution to

9. Hannah Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, edited by P. Baehr (New York: Penguin Classics, 2000).

10. The debate took place on Tuesday, May 9, 2007. Available at <http://zope.gush-shalom.org/home/en/events/1178719775>.

11. Israeli analyst and commentator Benvenisti long ago introduced the term “irreversible” to describe Israel's occupation of the 1967-occupied territory. His work began with compiling *The West Bank Data Base Project: A Survey of Israel's Policies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984). The “project” proceeded to publish several reports in the following years outlining an objective integrationist policy being implemented by the Occupying Power in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem). His view (that Israel's annexationist policy is irreversible) has been contested ever since its initial publication. In a sense, the one-state/two-state now being debated is a reformulation of the same debate on whether occupation can be ended. In the context, we can imagine Benvenisti arguing that Israel's unforeseen and irreversible occupation of the West Bank back in '67 is itself the real case of a black swan, rather than the wished-for emergence of a Palestinian State.

the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is dead. In response, Avneri in effect argued one should not allow oneself to be misled by these so-called signs. In his experience, he added, theorists only scanned political surfaces. They were totally oblivious to major subterranean currents, which suddenly manifested themselves in people's lives as if jumping out of nowhere. Avneri's point—Tolstoy, by the way, uses the same image of a calm-looking sea surface that hides a subterranean movement of historical forces underneath—was that appearances (“signs”) can be deceptive. Or even that what we are looking at may not be what there is, or the whole of what there is! Translated into Taleb's terms, Avneri seemed to be saying that, on closer look, what may surprise some of us as a black swan can turn out to be nothing really but a signet, growing up naturally there all along, just like the young grass that also grows unseen at night, to finally and unexpectedly reveal a worthy king previously drenched in seemingly wasteful youthful ribaldry. The determined Henry of the breach at Agincourt, in other words, was naught after all but the ribald Hal, finally in full blossom. Likewise, the real though mostly hidden historical forces at work, Avneri seemed to be reassuring us, will eventually usher in the Palestinian State, shining resplendently and as royally upon us as King Henry V! On the other hand, we can imagine Pappé's contention, in contrast with that of Avneri's, as being that a Palestinian State, if it were miraculously and inexplicably to appear, would really be a prime example of what black swans are, or of erratically jolting atoms, or of those infinitely improbable occurrences that Hannah Arendt would count as miracles,¹² as no evidence points to its eventual creation, and, indeed, all available data indicate its evaporation from the realm of possibility!

Let us try to unravel this signet-swan distinction a little bit further: A signet eventually acquires its naturally predestined white color—just as, presumably, Prince Hal eventually assumes his rightful and natural kingly character. If one mistakes it momentarily for a young, out-of-the-box black swan (or for a baby duck, for that matter), one's misdiagnosis can eventually be shown for what it is. Whether in the case of the signet, or of Prince Hal, the “trick” is therefore for us not to be misled by surface appearances but to try to look beyond the surface, whether vertically or horizontally, so to speak—for example, to see the signet in terms of its inner genetic code, or Prince Hal along his entire life path. The trick, in other words, is to play

12. Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” See also Lecture II below for an extended treatment of Arendt's views.

a little bit with our own lenses, or focus, or to decide on the area we wish to zoom in on.¹³ Clearly, on this view, had early ornithologists included Australia in their information repository on birds, they would not have misled us into believing that all swans were white. In a parallel fashion—to pick out an example of an event being engaged in by human beings—many of us at first may have been caught by surprise last August as news of Russian tanks rolling into Georgian territory reached us. Was this a black swan, totally disconnected from earlier happenings, or simply the inevitable part of a longer-range historical development? Was it already there, “waiting” to surface? Or did it fly in from a totally different continent? In the Georgia case, the news media quickly informed us of at least some background history—extending back some fifteen years. Still, often as we try to understand what we are confronted with, or what is there before us, we need to decide how to fix our lenses, what to zoom in on. These are, if anything, troublesome questions about what exactly there is, what exactly we are looking at. Though, it must be said, in the case of events, such as wars, far more perhaps than in the case of physical objects, of signets, or of conscious individuals such as Prince Hal, the area being scrutinized for identification may seem to us at any rate to be far more opaque, and therefore obscure.¹⁴ It is in this context that a sympathetic chord may be struck as one hears echoes of Bob Dylan’s Mr. Jones’s confused state of mind—not knowing what is happening, nor indeed even knowing what anything

13. The expressions “cognitive zoom” and “a cognitive fix” are used by Howard Wettstein (also see Lecture II below) in the context of his critique of what he calls “linguistic Cartesianism”—two different schools of reference (Frege-Russell, and Kaplan-Perry) that wrongly in his view place a high premium for successful reference on a speaker-object “cognitive contact” rather than a linguistic-contact convention merely. See Wettstein, *The Magic Prism: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). The reader will surmise that some of the basic questions I raise in these lectures invoke an entire history of debate on the theory of reference, and Wettstein’s quoted work presents the student with one of the clearest overall contemporary histories of this debate. I share many of Wettstein’s misgivings, as he explains them, concerning current views on reference, but rather than doing away with the cognitive function altogether, as he suggests, my choice is instead to emphasize it but also to interpret it in an active or “constructivist”—and therefore, also, a conventional sense, or one that he assigns to what he calls “linguistic contact.”

14. This quadruple distinction (between, in general terms, an event, a supposedly “robotic” animal, a physical object, and a rational and self-conscious being) may be said to bear on what being an individual is, or, phrased differently, on the issue of what objects can be said to possess a *personal identity*, individual human beings having best claim, so to speak, to that status. From a Quinean or “positivist” point of view, the matter is optional, since speakers of the language commit to what has such identity by positing it in their discourse as an object, be it a breathing biological entity, a mountain range, or an event such as the Hundred Years’ War. However, a more traditional manner of categorizing the world is one where identity-ambiguity may be entertained in the case of events but not in the case of such objects as tables and chairs, or poodles and persons.

is (incidentally, I was amused to discover that Mr. Jones's own identity has been and continues to be clouded in confusion!).¹⁵

But the confusion spreads much further than the signet-swan trajectory. Let me explain: Ever since Aristotle made out the distinction between being a substance, or a *this*, and being a predicate, or an additional attribute describing the object being talked about, there have been occasions when philosophers—I am thinking here of such figures as al-Kindi and Avicenna—questioned whether the “being a one,” or “a this,” is truly a constitutive part of the substance being considered, or whether it is in fact something additional, or a predicate, in the same troublesome way as that other classical question has been raised of whether existence is a predicate.¹⁶ If “an existent exists” does not seem to be saying very much, and actually sounds like a tautology, then how much more is this true of “an existent is an existent,” or “*this is one (or a) thing*”? There are two issues here: The very act of pointing to a *house*—it is arguable—nullifies the existence of an information content in the sentence saying it is a house, making that sentence look like a tautology. The second issue, though, has to do with whether the property of being one, like that of existence, is uniquely that of God, and only accidentally attached to everything else. But what follows if we accept this distinction is having to posit entities—even just hypothetically—more in the nature of “undifferentiated form.” There can be two kinds of such entity posits. One, existing outside of ourselves, like “the being a swan,” or “swanishness,” can be a cognitive waiting-list passenger, so to speak, or a posit awaiting full identification by us pending further discoveries, such as the Australian type. The second, being a potential manner of categorizing ourselves, such as Zionism, or Hamas, would also be on the waiting list, but pending our own decisions as to how to identify them. As themselves, that is, as posits prior to identification, they would

15. Mr. Jones, among fans of Bob Dylan, remains a mysterious figure, whether as a paradigm or as an actual person, and the Web is replete with inconclusive theories about who “he” might be, or what the paradigm is a paradigm of.

16. Aristotle first introduces the basic distinction between those things in the world that are subjects and those things that are predicable of subjects in the Categories part of his *Organon*. A *substance*, properly speaking, is neither predicable of a subject nor present in one. While *quantity* (alongside other categories) is immediately set apart from substance, the question remains whether, of that, unity can intelligibly also be set apart. Philosophers from the early Islamic period, starting with al-Kindi in his *On First Philosophy*, treated this topic extensively, the real motivation being whether to accept considering unity to be an essential attribute of existents other than God, thus denying God of the uniqueness of this attribute, and subscribing instead to a doctrine of essentialism in the natural world. Avicenna followed al-Kindi in his antiessentialist position, while other philosophers, notably al-Farabi and Averroes, adopted an essentialist point of view. Interestingly, Stephen Pinker begins his most recent work, *The Stuff of Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), with a related discussion, drawn initially from a legal dispute, concerning whether 9/11 was *one* event or more.

be just themselves. But they would be also such as to lend themselves to being individuated, that is, to being given a defining border, by us, making them recognizable as meaning—for example, a bellicose militant movement, or an expansionist movement.¹⁷

The advantage, of course, to adopting the notion of what I called “undifferentiated form” or this approach to the understanding of what there is to cancel out the rigidity of identities, Zionism thus ceasing to have an independently rigid meaning or identity locking in, like the Iron Mask, whoever becomes a Zionist. On the contrary, the terrain would be left open, so to speak, for renewing and changing definitions. The downside of this approach, however, is proliferation. Thus, mindful of the freehanded way in which we tend to expand our universe by incorporating reference in our discourse to all kinds of entities or objects in the world, big and small, primary and secondary, physical and conceptual, there have been philosophers even closer to our time and to *this* place who have appealed to us to be more frugal, by adhering strictly to the admission rule “No entity without Identity”!¹⁸

The issue is certainly not so straightforward. If entity-hood (or *this-ness*) and identity (or *oneness*) are different from one another, then the question naturally arises as to which does one determine first, the entity-hood of an entity, its “*this-ness*” or “*that-ness*,” if you like, or its oneness or identity? In any case, how could we envision their being different from one another in the first place—a prerequisite, one assumes, to being able to answer which it is of these two that one determines first? Or are these questions totally meaningless? The answers to these questions—including the last one—would seem at first guess to hold the key to the puzzle

17. Using the example Horse (rather than swan), Avicenna—choosing to ignore even for this purpose the distinction between entities in the natural world and those ideologies we ourselves formulate—rhetorically asks, “What is horseness, *per se*, but horseness? The minute one affirms, for example, it is such-and-such, one is already affirming the existence of something other than horseness *of* horseness; likewise, denying it is such-and-such is like presupposing it could be such-and-such (or anything else) in the first place. Either way, one wouldn’t be positing horseness by itself, but horseness with (possibly) something else.” Avicenna then moves on to show that those entity posits come by an additional act to be what we view them as, whether in the mind or in the external world. For more on this, see my “Al-Aql al-Qudsi: Avicenna’s Subjective Theory of Knowledge,” *Studia Islamica* (1989): 39–54.

18. W. V. O. Quine, *Ontological Relativity, and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969). “This,” in the reference to *this* place, happens not to be Lowell Hall, where I delivered this lecture at Harvard, but Emerson Hall, on the other side of the Yard, where Quine was installed until his death at the end of 2000. Quine’s quoted motto, as well as his “to be is to be the value of a variable,” has been the subject of much debate. Notably for our purposes, see, for example, Decio Krause’s essay “Entity, but No Identity” (available at <http://philsci-archive.pitt.edu/archive/00003283/01/Entities.pdf>), where the argument is made for entertaining “non-individual entities” in the context of a metalanguage about scientific theories.

concerning the eruption of the Lebanese civil war, and the debate concerning the black-swan syndrome, the matter possibly seeming to depend (if we place wars in the same category as swans, or as things outside of ourselves) on the field of discourse, or on how widely open or focused our lenses are. Thinking of swans, for example, it could be said that the confusion arises from the *this-ness* or entity-hood first picked out by the term “swan” not being the full extension of that set in reality—a matter that came to light only when Australian swans were discovered. The fault here, it could be argued, lay in misidentifying, or falling short of fully identifying, the entity being talked about. Likewise, the *this-ness* of the Georgian affair—what we all took ourselves to be talking about—turned out to be but the visible part of the story. But as soon as one began to scrutinize further what was really unfolding before one, one discovered there was much more than met the eye. In both examples, then, there seems to be a case for arguing that there is a preliminary confusion about the identity of what it is that constitutes one’s object of discourse, or what one assumes one picks out by an ostensive definition.

But even that is only part of the story, as the image of the sea that Tolstoy constantly uses as an example of the inscrutability of human history may paradoxically help clarify. Here more than anywhere else one can see how *this-ness* and identity are not necessarily commensurate, but one can also see much more: in this example, more clearly perhaps than in the other examples we considered, defining the boundaries dividing one sea from another would seem like a highly arbitrary—I want to say visibly subjective—enterprise, the features of oneness, of identity, and therefore also of definition very clearly being consequent to *our* act of drawing a line. We can imagine a preliminary act of ostensive definition—a physical gesture of *that-ness* where someone may point vaguely at an undefined mass of water—the gesture being at once fairly open-ended and imprecise while at the same time sufficing for the further step of more precise individuation: defining a boundary, describing, naming. Of course, one assumes that that is an extreme example, that the examples one normally confronts in life—signets, individuals, events—are much more self-wrapped, so to speak, in their own objective finitude. That may well be, of course. But the sea example already begins to blur borders, between undifferentiated matter and undifferentiated form, for example, and between what we assume to exist independently of us and what we ourselves bring into the world.

Introducing the sea example into our discourse warns us in any case of having to account for *three* kinds of claims rather than two that are

relevant to the signet-swan distinction. There is the claim, first, that identifying an object in the world is a precondition for understanding it, in the sense that we set out to seek to see or apprehend what there is, so that, for instance, the historian will try to look beyond a specific incident, or a doctor will search through a number of confusing and apparently disconnected symptoms for *the* underlying cause of a deteriorating health condition. According to this first claim, then, the determining issue is that of the width and depth of our lenses: if we were omniscient enough, we could see right into the depths of the ocean and be assured, as a result, of foreseeing some impending war between one country and another, or some financial crisis, or, analogously, the creation of a Palestinian State—just as we could have also foreseen the eventual appearance of black swans.

The second claim, on the other hand, is that, try to look as hard as we might, we will not see the so-called impending Palestinian State lurking anywhere in the depths of the ocean, for the simple reason that it is not there in any stage, form, or shape. Here we might then distinguish between two subperspectives for this claim—that, like Taleb's, of nonetheless not discounting the possibility of the appearance of this state, and considering it to be a typical case of a black swan should it suddenly appear out of nowhere, and that, like Ilan Pappé's, of discounting its possibility altogether, and definitively—something like the atheist-agnostic distinction.

But these two claims, I wish to emphasize, are predicated on there being an identifiable object out there in the first place, with the difference being over what that identifiable object is—its reach, as well as its content. In terms of the appreciation-knowledge distinction I made right at the beginning of this presentation, one's proper starting place in the world in light of these claims is but the perfection of available knowledge, that is, the apprehension or grasping of what there is, in confirmation of the principle that to know x is to imply there is x . As human beings, we stand powerless before what is, our capabilities being limited, and at best even celebrated by our claims to have achieved that knowledge. I want to say that externalizing, or reifying, our objects of knowledge in this way is to ascribe them with independence, and therefore rigidity, impermeability, even sovereignty. We can imagine the debate between Avneri and Pappé at this point as revolving, as observers, around what there is out there to be seen, with Pappé contenting himself with the visible surface and Avneri claiming there are far more things happening out there than we can imagine even in our wildest dreams!

However, there is, as we saw, a third, and generically *opposite*, claim, for which the sea-metaphor example is also apt, in that it provides us with an altogether different paradigm, as I tried to explain. This is the claim that posits understanding—I would like to say appreciating—as itself being a precondition for identifying, in the sense that it is we who individuate or separate out between entities in the world that are otherwise not independently separate from one another, so that it is our mental categories or tools for understanding that impose upon us, or with which we choose, to view the world in the distributive way we end up seeing it.

The first two claims may strike us intuitively as being more natural, especially in those areas or fields of study where we are called upon, like detectives, to find an answer, or to identify a cause, or a “whodunit.” Identifying such a cause counts as a measure of our success, or distinction. So, for example, a distinguishing feature of Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* is said to have been its treatment of the entire series of events covering the period 431–404 BC—which seemed to the people living through them as different occurrences—as *one event*, or as *one war*, whose underlying cause Thucydides tried to identify. He himself saw his work as a “science” distinct from what he called “logography”—those works that contented themselves with being serialized narrational records, no analysis, verification, or interpretation attached. Likewise, one could stretch out one’s analytic perspective to see what appear to be separate events in Russia and Georgia going back, say, fifteen years as all being part of one unfolding historical development. The purpose of such an exercise would be to grasp what exactly is happening—“what’s going on?” in more recent lyrical language—in order to be able to deal with it, exactly as a doctor would deal with an illness.

But even as we do this, thinking of the exercise as being safely different from dealing with undifferentiated matter, like the waters of an ocean, one might still find oneself asking: How and where are we entitled to draw the lines? How far back in the history of South Ossetia or Abchasia do we need to go? And as we try to answer these questions, we might find the first two claims to identification beginning to compete with one another, making us oscillate between choosing a narrower or a wider focus. And this very indeterminacy might well find us drifting further into deeper seas, where the third claim on individuation begins to vie for attention. In the circumstances this cognitive drift into the deep, inspired by our questions, may at first look like it is taking us in the wrong direction altogether, for it assumes *us* to be the arbiters of what there is, when our stated

purpose of being able to deal with what is happening would at least seem logically to be dependent, like in the case of doctors, on the assumption of either the first or the second of the three claims we identified on individuation, the assumption, namely, that entities or events have their own life independently of us, and that our problems primarily obtain precisely when we fail to see all the bits and pieces of the larger picture—of what there is—when, instead, we deal with a part (a particular symptom, or a particular invasion) as though it was the whole. As doctors, after all, we are not supposed to concoct illnesses in our patients—we are not the arbiters of what there is. We are merely called upon to identify or discover what it is that already afflicts the patient's body in order to treat it.

Let me help make the plot thicken a little bit further: A colleague of mine recently surprised a visiting American congressional delegation (and me) when he asked, rhetorically, whether they believed the Six-Day War was over! What he meant, of course, was that we (Israelis and Palestinians particularly) were still living that war, which everyone glibly identifies as a war that lasted for just those six days in June. In my friend's mind, that war broke out on the eve of June 6, 1967, has raged and subsided in different forms through the years, but it has not come to an end yet! If one mulls over this a bit, one can easily understand how, by extrapolation, in the minds of many in the Arab and Muslim worlds, the very war of 1948–1949, from which Israel came to be, is not over yet either. That may help explain—to them and to us—why, rhetorically, actually, or in whatever way, they are still fighting it. Well, is Israel's "War of Independence" over yet, or is it still raging? We should not dismiss this as a quixotic question, accounting simply for the delusory hallucinations of one person or one national group and otherwise totally disconnected from the objective world. Clearly, whether it is rational or hallucinatory, our thinking is very much intermeshed with the world we inhabit. Indeed, one may even say, if you like, that there exists a "tipping point" in the world of hallucinations where what may have been a truly subjective affair up to that point suddenly becomes very much part of an objective reality. Simply, if one side to a war thinks it is not over yet, then it may indeed not be over, even if the other side thinks or insists it is. As a matter of fact, sooner or later even the other side can also wake up to the fact that it is not over yet. Let me quote from a review by Shlomo Ben-Ami of a book about that war (of Israeli independence and the Palestinian *nakbah*) that recently appeared in *Foreign Affairs*: "Israel must admit once and for all that the territorial phase of Zionism has ended, dismantle most of the West Bank settlements, and

help create a viable Palestinian state as soon as possible. *This is Israel's only chance to seal its 1948 victory.*"¹⁹

Let me quickly try to dispel the notion from our heads that what we seem to have before us here is simply a problem of naming, or of definitions, or, conversely, dispel the notion that the problem of naming or of definitions we have before us is simple. I would claim instead that our problem more fundamentally or in the first place is one of *identifying* what it is we have before us! The two statements "Israel achieved a victory in 1948 that is yet to be sealed" and "Israel is yet to achieve a victory for the war it (or that) started in 1948" may seem closely related, with light disparities only on the surface or at the extremities that can easily be ironed out through a better or a more precise articulation of the language being used—for example, by emphasizing the word "sealed" modifying "victory." But on reflection, one can immediately tell that the scar runs deep. One statement assumes that Zionism or Israel has won, and what is left is some trimming—literally—to be done around the edges. The other statement assumes that Zionism or Israel as a project is still in the midst of battle, with an as yet inconclusive outcome. "The country that won the war in '48" is not the same entity as "The country that did not win the war in '48." Our object of discourse in one case is different from what it is in the second, though it may appear we are talking about the same entity and are merely disagreeing about how to describe it. It does not help here to insist that the definite subject ("the country") we have in both expressions is the same: that grammatical subject is an incomplete part of a definite description, which is itself what is supposed to pick out an object in the world. Likewise, "the Six-Day War" is not coextensive with what, by now, according to my friend, is "the 14,600-plus-days-and-still-counting war." In short, what we have here is a situation where identifying what it is we have before us (that is, individuating) well precedes naming as well as defining. If we return to the sea metaphor for a moment, it is as if, picking up our instruments of measurement and guided by whatever purpose we may have in mind, we need to draw up our imaginary lines in the *this-ness* or *that-ness* preliminarily indicated, in advance of our coming to name, for example, the Arab Gulf, or to define it.

But once again, how do we decide how to decide on what is before us: for example, whether it is a six-day war, a 14,600-plus-day war, a 21,900-plus-day war, a still unfinished branch of the First World War, etc.? After

19. Shlomo Ben-Ami, "A War to Start All Wars," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 5 (2008): 156 (emphasis added).

all, one can go down this discovery path seemingly forever, with each step being taken making our quest look even more absurd and disconnected. In view of the mounting confusion and frustration this can create, one may well ask, well, what difference does it make anyway which it is? And this may well be the relevant question to ask, because it should matter whether what we are looking at is the trunk of a celestial elephant, for example, or the bottom end of a time tunnel. It clearly makes a difference what it is, and, as I shall boldly argue below, the converse is true, that is, what it is is precisely what difference that makes!

The bold jump I just made—for which I beg your temporary indulgence—paves my way for introducing the subject of human agency, or the role of the human will in determining history, which is what I will take up in the second of these two lectures. But even assuming for now we are working on the assumption of independently identifiable objects, it is abundantly clear that it does indeed make all the difference in the world to have a proper diagnosis instead of a misdiagnosis, in that whereas the former can lead to the right treatment of an ailment, the latter may simply exasperate the ill condition of the patient, or, at best, leave the patient still suffering from that ailment. One assumes here, in analogous fashion, that ailments as well as treatments can also affect human political topographies, a biscuit prescription not quite substituting for voting rights. It is in this framework that one may feel entitled to ask what is a proper treatment for the state of war that exists between Israelis and Palestinians—for instance, dividing the land equitably between peoples or dividing political rights distributively among individuals. But even as one seeks the right treatment, one's efforts are blunted by needing first to identify the ailment—or, even more fundamentally, to identify the political organism or organisms afflicted by that ailment in the first place. This is not, as may be conjectured, mere nitpicking. We may ask, for example: What exactly is the political organism out there before us on the Jewish side? What Israel are we contending with? Is it the Israel, for example, that is rooted in the destruction of the First and Second Temples? Is it the Israel recovering from the scars of the Holocaust? The Israel awaiting the Messiah? Is it an organism, like the signet or Prince Hal, still in the process of becoming—one that stretches in time into the past and into some predestined future, for whose proper identification we still have to wait? Surely, any one of those, or other Israels, being distinct, and having its identity and its own circumstance, will have a different overriding purpose requiring a distinct treatment. Likewise, on the Palestinian side, our effort to identify

a subject can be blunted by any number of legitimate conjectures—all requiring different (though some may indeed be overlapping) approaches: in brief, how do we set about our individuating procedure in such a way as to account for, and then perhaps to trim out for practical purposes, such parts of the political organism as those that stretch back in history to the Edomites or Canaanites, or extend in geographic space from the Arab Gulf to the Atlantic, or get subsumed by the far more dominant and widespread identity of Islam? Not only do identities that we start up with and that seemed to us at the beginning to be distinct and separate suddenly multiply in any number of confusing ways, each emergent identity clearly having different needs and considerations, as well as ailments and treatments: worse, so faded the one, in being arbitrarily subsumed by the other, becomes, and so fleeting like one wave lapping into another and then melting into one indistinct stretch of prime or undifferentiated matter, that we end up having to act ourselves, as in the case of the ocean, to draw our own suitable borders, to create our own suitable identities!

But how, finally, can we do this? We need here to confront our demons: to decide on what to carry out our diagnosis, on what it is that stands before us. I already suggested that the two questions “What is it?” and “What difference does it (or that) make?” are closely interdependent—the significance of the first question, which otherwise might be deemed to be too *recherché*, being made clear by the second. I already intimated that one could—pursuing the same line of logic, but with an even more significant outcome—approach this idea also from the opposite direction: the matter of deciding what it is before us being dependent upon our assessment of whether and how we can make a difference to the world. Let me explain: one could, taking Zionism and Arab nationalism to be what they purport to be, deduce that these two are inconsistent with one another, and, going along with this assessment and the view of the world that goes with it, simply view one’s own role as a political agent as consisting of being the human medium through which these metabiological entities (that is, these ideologies or “movements”) dictate their own moves in history. Proponents of this worldview, in other words, will take what exists for granted. If it looks to them that the Oslo peace process is dying, that is what they will take for granted—that that metabiological political creature of such and such a description is about to give up the ghost. Of course, it is not being claimed that such people are naive and are unaware that it is human beings who breathe life into such entities in the first place: only that, once “alive and kicking,” so to speak, the belief seems to be that

these entities somehow acquire independence and become impervious to human interference. The biological parents, in other words, end up finding themselves becoming the slaves of their metabiological progenies. I, the Hamas member, the Likud leader, the Palestinian nationalist, am a mere pawn in the larger picture of history, where the real players are grand ideologies, divine plans, or political movements moving of their own accord, propelled by their inner dynamics, either toward glory or toward an inevitable collision with another rigidly predefined entity moving at high velocity in the opposite direction, along the same path. We recognize that worldview as being what Isaiah Berlin singles out for criticism in his essays on liberty.²⁰ Above all, echoing Tolstoy's own anguishing questions, but from the exactly opposite perspective, Berlin does not wish to absolve historical criminals from their heinous crimes against humanity by an appeal to a mechanically deterministic view of history. He is therefore extremely suspicious of attributing some form of life to so-called historic forces, choosing to leave room, however apparently small in absolute terms, for choices we make, and for our moral responsibility for those choices.

But there is an opposite worldview, and an altogether different approach, one that envisions the parent as remaining on the saddle. I already referred to that as being the political agent's—as opposed to the historian's—approach. In short, guided by a vision of how life might be better if Zionism or nationalism were different, one sets out to redefine them in order to make them different and, in so making them, to make the world a better place. What one has here is a situation where, instead of taking what exists for granted, the human agent in fact sets out to graft what there is, guided by what difference his doing so would make. More generally, this is a paradigm where human agents assume mastery of identities, whether theirs or those of others, rather than play it safe as those identities' slaves. This is the *modus operandi* of the lateral-thinking, multiskilled, problem-solving, creative fox! Or, as Hannah Arendt would say, of the political miracle maker!

Let me, as I end my lecture, recount to you the following story about one particular fox and his unpredictable ways as told by a Welsh farming couple. Standing in their garden, the said couple one day notice a fox in the middle of the field where their sheep are grazing. Their terrier, having noticed the fox at the same time, like a bolt of lightning dives under the garden fence and leaps into the field, in pursuit of the fox. The fox, seeing the danger, begins to run. But instead of running far and away, as even

20. Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

the least intelligent of human beings might do if they are being chased by a dangerous animal, the fox chooses to run in circles. The terrier, for whom chasing seems to mean literally that, continues to run after the fox in circles, until finally, fully exhausted, she simply collapses on the ground, panting heavily. Guess then what happens? At this point, the fox stops, turns around, and starts running toward the terrier, who gets up and for some reason starts running away. This bizarre circus ends only when the terrier finally decides to return home. By the way, neither does the fox touch the sheep, nor do the sheep seem the least interested in what is going on. That, anyhow, is the story as the Welsh farmers related it in the BBC's Web page on nature.

LECTURE II. OF FOLLY, FAITH, AND MIRACLES

What did our (Welsh) fox (from last time) do? One answer is that, on sensing danger, he quickly weighed between making a run for it and playacting as two possible courses of action, and decided that playacting would serve his purpose best. Already this two-part image (of sensing and acting) sets our fox apart from the hedgehog, whose image typically is that of a single-minded, bookwormish creature who is bent on burrowing ever deeper into the ground in apparent search for the buried treasure of knowledge, or *the* Truth.

I will address the sensing part in this fox image later. The playacting component, on the other hand, is itself made up of two parts, the part relating to acting as in drama, or theater, or the performing arts, and the part relating to acting as in doing, that is, being active versus mere being. In her thought-provoking essay “What Is Freedom?” Hannah Arendt underscores the importance of both of these components in her exposition of what acting freely in the political realm means.²¹ It has little to do, she argues, with what the expression has come to mean in the philosophical literature—that is, in that private-space contest in which acts of free will are contrasted with or are set apart from acts that are predetermined by some set of previously existing conditions. It is easy within such a context, Arendt contends, to fall into the trap of denying (or failing to prove) any autonomous role for political actors at all. Originally, that is, in the classical Greek and Latin worlds, freedom was an attribute of action—something external and public rather than something internal and private; the word for acting in the political realm or in public space meant “bringing something new into the world,” “beginning,” “leading,” or even “creating”—something that only the free, that is, those individuals who were unencumbered by life’s quotidian needs, could do. In this sense, only citizens were able to act—that is, to play or fulfill the decision-making or creative role in a republic that autonomous individuals are expected to play. Since “to act” meant to be a creator, or to be autonomous, a citizen as a political actor was a paradigm of what acting freely meant. It would have therefore been totally contradictory to think of political actors as individuals who

21. Arendt likens politics to the performing arts: “Performing artists—dancers, play-actors, musicians, and the like—need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men need the presence of others before whom they can appear” (“What Is Freedom?” 446). The references in the next paragraph to the Greek and Latin roots of the word “act” begin on p. 455.

were mere instruments in a mechanistic or more generally deterministic world. The notion of acting was naturally paired with that of freedom in political public space, while that of freedom was totally unrelated to that of the will in psychological private space, with which it came later to be associated, via Saint Paul and the Christian tradition.

Metaphorically, on the other hand, Arendt tells us, a citizen was (and thought classically to be) most like a performing artist, that is, like one whose skill and success were a function of her creative playacting, where this creativity was expressed by the performing act itself, rather than, as in other forms of creative arts, being hidden from the audience, and only later exhibited in her work as an end product. Like the politician, the performing artist acts before (even *for the sake of*) an audience. Both politician and artist are by definition free, for they are actors in the original Greek sense of this word, or the sense in which their performance is what they themselves bring to life, and to the world, and what stays in the world only through constant reenactment.

Arendt would, I believe, have considered our resourceful fox as an excellent example of an actor in the original sense she describes. Not that she, or we, should conclude that foxes or political actors—though known to be sly—are therefore sensible, that is, intelligent creatures, as we could glean from her own short (and perhaps playfully titled?) essay “Heidegger the Fox.”²² On the contrary, foxes, like politicians, are just as prone to folly. In this short tale, ostensibly told by Heidegger himself, the fox not only ends up digging his own trap but actually comes to believe, even as he lives in it, that he is the greatest fox of all! This is simply because he finds that many foxes come to visit him in it. Of course, neither does he know that his self-made abode is a trap, therefore explaining the constant visits of his fellow foxes, nor does he know that the reason they do not stay is simply that the trap cannot hold them together and is big enough just for him. But with such a constant stream of “visitors,” he concludes he must be the greatest fox of all. And with good reason, Arendt concludes, for nobody knows the nature of traps better than one who sits in a trap his whole life long!

As one reads this tale, it is difficult to keep away from one’s mind the haunting image of Mr. Palestine himself, Yasser Arafat, especially during those last days that he spent holed up in his shattered headquarters. Nor, indeed, is it easy to keep away, on a larger scale, the image of Israel or of Palestine, either. There is a sense in which all these parties, in addition to

22. Arendt, “Heidegger the Fox,” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, 543–44.

being so full of themselves, are or seem to be—sometimes if not always, and mostly due to folly—trapped. But in what sense are they victims of their own folly?

In an attempt to answer this question I would like to invoke what I believe to be some of Arendt's more memorable insights in this context, first by setting her brand of being trapped apart from seemingly similar meanings. For this reason, let us first consider what we might call "the determinist trap." This requires us to step back from Arendt to Tolstoy, and to turn from foxes to sheep. Tolstoy, at his hedgehog best, tells us:

To a herd of rams, the ram the herdsman drives each evening into a special enclosure to feed, and that becomes twice as fat as the others, must seem to be a genius. And it must appear an astonishing conjunction of genius with a whole series of extraordinary chances that this ram, who instead of getting into the general fold every evening gets into a special enclosure where there are oats—this very ram, swelling with fat, is killed for meat.

But the rams need only cease to suppose that all that happens to them happens solely for the attainment of their sheepish aims.²³

Tolstoy continues, with such figures as Czar Alexander I and Napoleon in mind. And, using this metaphor to explain that what happens does not happen either accidentally or effectively by intelligent human design, he continues, "Only by renouncing our claim to discern a purpose immediately intelligible to us, and admitting the ultimate purpose to be beyond our ken, may we discern the sequence of experiences in the lives of historic characters, and perceive the cause of the effect they produce (incommensurable with ordinary human capabilities) and then the words *chance* and *genius* become superfluous."²⁴

In these teleological passages from *War and Peace*, Tolstoy invites us to consider what is happening around us not as actors but as an audience. This separation between the world stage and the audience already puts us at an epistemic disadvantage: we do not have direct access to what is going on inside the heads of those on the world stage. As observers we are warned not to trust our senses, because what is unfolding before our eyes is only a segment, a part of what there is, which we can begin to understand and therefore to relate to only if we accept we cannot fully comprehend

23. Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (reprint, New York: Penguin Classics, 1982), 892.

24. *Ibid.*

it. What appears is only part of a much larger “happening,” an inevitable historical flow charted by divine guidance. Whatever we see on the stage—however seemingly imperial— is but make-believe, strutting emperors and generals being but puppets entrapped in the historical flow of destiny.

What Tolstoy does here is first to invoke our embedded sense of perplexity as to what is happening before us, but then, restricting our role to that of an audience, he proceeds to provide us with his version of how to understand this perplexity—the divine flow of destiny. We can imagine, in today’s world, also if we wished to view ourselves as an audience, such a spectacle being Israel, simply fulfilling a prescribed role in a divine plan, whether in accordance with evangelical or with Jewish faith. This exercise should not be too difficult, as these passages eerily echo the evangelical account of an Israel being gathered together and “fattened” in the Promised Land, in preparation for the final countdown, when Jews will convert or perish. What we see before us, we can be told, is not all of what there is; it is, in any case, as one settler in the Old City of Jerusalem once kindly tried to reassure me, “happening” or “being done” not out of spite, or ill intent toward me as a Palestinian, but as part of a divine plan, a plan to which neither he nor I could make a difference. Our perplexing questions from the last lecture concerning individuation and identity—what is it exactly that is out there, that we are seeing?—though they may have seemed esoteric to the point of practical irrelevance then, suddenly assume political importance here. In this part-visible, part-invisible universe, where he believes that he and I are deterministically stuck in a divine flow of history, the *question* “What Israel?” suddenly cries out for all the attention such questions deserve, before one can answer whether Israel can indeed make peace with its neighbors or whether we are headed, like it or not, toward an ultimate collision.

Tolstoy’s “audience-perspective” passages about sheep stand in sharp contrast with the “actor-perspective” fox stories we considered earlier: Tolstoy’s sheep are passive creatures, their situation being analyzed from the outside, by an observer. Things happen to them. They—including their presumed genius—are led into this ken or that. They do not initiate a drama or make things happen. Indeed, one cannot accuse them of folly. The Welsh fox, on the other hand, as well as Heidegger’s are active—even creative—creatures: they initiate action, making things happen, whether resourcefully, as in the case of the terrier, or foolishly, as in the case of Heidegger. If we apply these two respective images—of the sheep and of the fox—to the realm of politics, we generate two different paradigms of po-

litical traps, as well as two approaches to understanding political action, a difference that may account for the different approaches to freedom taken by Arendt and Isaiah Berlin.

I will return to pursue the Arendt-Berlin perspectives shortly. But let us—in order to bring the point home—turn our gaze momentarily to the current political situation.²⁵ Both before and after the Annapolis political fanfare held last year on the so-called Mideast peace process when journalists or friends asked me what my expectations were from that gathering of world leaders, my interlocutors would look half-disbelievingly and half-pityingly on me whenever I gave them my answer: all it took, I would tell them, was for Olmert and Abbas to step inside a room, no lawyers, gurus, or political stars attached, where, in less than one minute, they could easily initial a framework of a final-status agreement, thus changing the course of history by writing their own. Just as simple as that. My idea was that the two leaders could then have initiated an electoral process in both nations using the agreement they both initialed as their respective political platforms. Of course, one can well appreciate the sentiment of pity that may have been felt by some of my interlocutors on hearing my remarks: chances are they thought that, as a Palestinian, I had every right to be beginning to lose my sense of what is realistic. And so, that benign part of their reaction I would accept with grace. But it is the disbelief component in their reactions that would infuriate me, for it would reflect all those pitiable excuses people make up for themselves to explain why things they claim they like to happen do not happen, or why things they claim they do not like to happen do. One excuse, for example, that would typically be brought up may be that political agreements need to be drawn up in detail by lawyers in advance. Another is that both gentlemen would need the approval of this or that party, person, or group first. Yet another excuse is that major political events, or events of historic consequence, do not come about as simply as that; great moments in history require the pomp and ceremony appropriate to great events: the Quartet, the U.S. president, preparatory marathon negotiations, red carpets, and so on are all essential ingredients of an event of such magnitude and should surely all somehow be woven into the occasion to make it come to pass. Yet others might say another setting would be more conducive to better negotiating terms for one or the other of those leaders, who surely therefore will bide their time before putting pen to paper. And then there will be those who will

25. By “current” I mean the deadlocked situation since the breakdown of the Camp David talks in 2000, and right up to the end of this year, 2008.

claim the whole vision is impossible in the first place, that there is a wall built with some unknown, extraterrestrial material obstructing a potential agreement, and this wall is simply impenetrable—at least by poorly earth creatures like us.²⁶

In my view, all these reactions and attitudes expose by placing under the direct spotlight what may be the darkest corner of the human condition that pitiable black hole of human frailty, signifying the absolute absence of faith in human capability. It is pitiable because of deifying one's so-called knowledge, and then surrendering oneself and one's beliefs to its dictates. It is a black hole because it is into it that the light of hope for humanity disappears. Surrendering to this frailty is submitting to one kind of entrapment—including, in extreme form, the sheep variety.

In Isaiah Berlin's case, one suspects the focus is also, like Tolstoy's though in the opposite direction, primarily "audience oriented."²⁷ When he takes the deterministic view of history to task, he does so not so much because he believes such a view can or has been disproved but because he worries, rightly, about absolving political criminals of their crimes. In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy qua historian addresses the topic of personal responsibility in the context of what people could, or could not, hold Czar Alexander, or Napoleon, accountable for. For Tolstoy, the exercise of blaming or questioning this or that act done or omitted by one or another of these

26. Though I am not certain of this, yet it may be the case that a person's sense of what it is in their power to do is in part a function of their roles in life, the more authority they are used to exercising being reflected in their increased sense of what it is in their power to do, in relative terms: for example, I am often amazed, as university president, by how many of my academic colleagues "overadapt" themselves to their regulative environment, thus becoming themselves authors of their own "chains"—such as, for example, how creative or inventive they could be in their teaching methods, or in the curriculum, or in the design of entirely new programs, and so forth. In conversation with them, it often transpires that they impute the source of those chains—misguidedly—to the "higher echelons" in the university. But in part, also, the question may have to do with how *entitled* one *feels* to take matters into his or her own hands, as, for example, in the political context of viewing oneself as a subject or as a citizen, or, in the context of a company, being a shareholder or an employee. It is instructive perhaps to recall President Anwar Sadat's visit to Israel back in 1978 and the speech he gave at the Knesset, where he significantly referred to his historic trip as one "breaking a psychological barrier." This is one place where that curious Platonic doctrine of Forms seems to make sense: that the *real* barrier between Israelis and Arabs is less material than psychological.

27. See, for example, his "Historical Inevitability," in *Four Essays on Liberty*: "I do not wish here to say that determinism is necessarily false, only that we neither speak nor think as if it could be true" (71). "Two Concepts of Liberty" follows on p. 118. By "audience oriented" I mean "pertaining to praise/blame"—a judgment typically applied to *others* as an object of discourse, and to oneself only when one views oneself as such an object of discourse. In contrast, viewing oneself as an actor is to view oneself as subject, not as an object. Berlin often repeats (for example, see his introduction, xxxiv–xxxv) that his main concern is not to refute determinism but to show that accepting it implies the need to revolutionize our entire notion of action and of responsibility.

historical characters, is utterly futile, constrained from the outset by a “ken mentality,” so to speak. So much grander is the movement of history, the reader is as much as being told, that even such grand figures should but be seen as mere puppets. It is in reaction to such a passive view of history, primarily with the notions of responsibility and culpability—as well as, probably, later genocidal criminals—in mind that Berlin takes major strides toward formulating his thesis on free agency, both in his controversial “Essay on Historical Inevitability” as well as in his “Two Concepts.” Whether in the essay on inevitability or more specifically in the context of his elaboration of what *positive* liberty is, Berlin expands on the notion of freedom as an attribute of the will in the political realm, making it come to occupy a prominent place in our understanding of the development of historical events. In a sense, Berlin’s emphasis on the political sense of freedom as one that can be understood only in association with the will (as positive freedom) is paradigmatic of what Arendt describes as being a later philosophical preoccupation—in her view, a misguided preoccupation that fails to do justice to the notion of political citizenship in the original sense, or in the sense in which freedom was considered to be an attribute of action rather than of the will. Berlin, of course, also expands on negative freedom—or that aspect of it that Arendt identifies as a precondition for political action.²⁸ But whereas Arendt’s focus thereafter is on free action in public space, Berlin’s remains on the will, where the notion of responsibility is paramount, but where also the grounds are less certain. And indeed, while strongly defending the notion of freedom of choice in political acts, and therefore of responsibility, at no time does Berlin categorically deny the possible validity of a deterministic world—in which actors are mere instruments—as an alternative possible paradigm. What he does insist on, perhaps as a backup position, and rightly, I believe, given his point of view, is the reminder that accepting such a different paradigm will necessarily require us as human beings to transform radically how we understand and treat one another on the basis of our acts. Meantime, however, in the absence of such a paradigmatic shift, we are not compelled to consider

28. Berlin generally introduces his two concepts as answers to two kinds of questions, one having to do with the area within which the subject (person or persons) should be left to do what they are capable of doing (negative) and the other having to do with what degree of control or authority a person or persons should have over their actions (positive). See his “Two Concepts of Liberty.” Of course, Berlin alerts us that the distinction is not razor edged, and answers can overlap. Without directly addressing Berlin himself, and concerned with that excessive self-rule, on a national scale, which can lead to authoritarianism, Arendt inclines to give more weight in her essay on freedom to the lifting of barriers against what individuals can do, the emphasis again being on “*do*.”

only genius or chance—Tolstoy's sheepish alternatives to understanding teleological history—as being by themselves sufficient to explain major political decisions or acts. On the contrary, Berlin so much as tells us, what we usually have to work with in our normal lives is the assumption that such acts, rather than being accidental, are far more often premeditated, and rather than reflecting genius, they far more commonly reflect those normal faults to which human beings are prone. But in each case, we take such acts in our normal practice to reflect the exercise of free will, distinguishing them from a host of other kinds of acts human beings commit. Most important, Berlin reminds us, perpetrators must be held culpable for what we commonly take to be their freely chosen acts. Indeed, the reader is inclined to feel that Berlin's real project is to defend the notion of culpability far more than the notion of free will, or freedom of action as such.

But if not being fully committed to freedom of action—leaving the matter open as to whether acts can be shown to be predetermined—Berlin in any case insists on calling our attention to that other prominent feature of our acts, namely, the determination with which we sometimes carry them out. As human beings we seem to be just so made up that, regardless of what we believe rationally to be the case, we nonetheless often act as though we can still make all the difference to the world by our actions. And, though less often perhaps than we would like, we congratulate ourselves in retrospect on having indeed succeeded in beating all the odds by our dogged determination.

Indeed, so gripped are we sometimes by this passion of determination that no purported proof, or supposed scientific evidence, of how doomed our future is can shake our faith in our ability to make a difference to our lives, or can dissuade us from attempting to carve out a better future for ourselves—or from doing our best to improve our lot, against any and all odds, and against all prophecies of doom, whether for ourselves or for our loved ones—and that, regardless of whether, in anticipation or retrospect, someone will tell us it was all preplanned or determined. Indeed, when pitted against our future-looking determination and will, all theories of determinism will seem to us to be totally irrelevant, even if proved to be true! This much, also, Berlin himself does not tire of reminding his readers.

But if we can provide a reasonable explanation for the existence and pervasiveness of this passion among those who believe in the openness of their futures, how can we reconcile its preponderance even among those

who believe in predetermination, but not in a God to which to turn? In the case of believers, the common escape route from this dilemma is prayer, and, through that, a divine miracle. But as to those who do not believe in God: how can we explain what often appears to be a total disdain for these forces of history, or for those academic disputations on free will and determinism, by nonbelieving individuals set on bettering their lives or on carving out their own destinies, even as they are convinced that their destinies have already been “written,” politically, economically, biologically, or in whatever (nondivine) manner?

Without a convincing answer, something surely would seem to be amiss in this sentiment, and in Berlin’s account. It would seem that we are compelled by it to hold that we must therefore suffer from some variety of the “akratic disease” (from *akrasia*), or, as Arendt quotes Augustine, from a schizophrenic disease of the mind whereby one’s will, though supposedly one in number, seems to turn out on closer inspection to be two,²⁹ or generally to accept that we are simply irrational—for example, by believing in the inevitability of a bloody showdown between Zionism and Palestinian nationalism or Islamism but devoting our energies nonetheless to making peace between them. Clearly, besides being self-deprecatory, none of these descriptions and interpretations of the human endeavor sound very convincing. Alternatively, we need to provide a reasonable explanation for how someone can come to believe both that determinism is true, but the die has not yet been cast, and so still set out to act with enough determination to make a difference to their lives. I believe we can find such a complementary explanation to Berlin’s account in Hannah Arendt’s *miracles*, or *improbable events*—a curious fact, perhaps, given Berlin’s disparaging remarks about her!³⁰

29. Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” 452. Expanding on Saint Paul’s predicament (“For to will is present in me; but how to perform that which is good I find not”), Augustine suggests that the will’s double face (to will and to nil) is a natural disease of the mind, where if a man is to have a will at all it must always appear as though there were two wills in the same man, fighting with each other over his mind! With Aristotle’s *akrasia*, on the other hand, the person in question is capable of cognizing the right middle term in a syllogism, and is thus rationally capable of forming the conclusion, and of knowing it to be true, yet be totally unmoved by it to act or to refrain from acting in light of it.

30. See R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Halban, 2007), 81ff. In effect, Berlin claims that Arendt has nothing new or “arresting” to say, and that much of what she claims (for example, about the Greek or Jewish concepts of labor) is false. Jahanbegloo, presumably puzzled by Berlin’s assessment, asks him if his view of her is influenced by the fact she is not a Zionist, but Berlin denies that, insisting that he never really discovered what made some people regard her so highly.

But let me first at this stage and before presenting and developing Arendt's insights try to take stock of the ground we have covered: our original subject of inquiry, we may remember, originating in our sense of perplexity concerning what there is, was how to relate so-called patterns, in nature or human affairs, with sudden, inexplicable, and earthshaking breaks from them. One approach—it was suggested—was to consider them to be the utterly disconnected and unpredictable black swans they seem to be, in which case we can but helplessly or happily spot them when they appear, or, second, though invisible for an unspecified period of time, we may consider them to be built into the system under our purview, in which case we can, in finding sufficient reasons for expecting them, reflect this expectation by expressing pessimism or optimism concerning our forecast. Both these approaches, we observe, ascribe some kind of inevitability to these wave breakers: we are either unable to prevent the unpredictable or insufficiently omniscient to make the right prediction. But in both cases, our presumed role seems to consist of no more than that of the neutral observer—the historian or scientist or audience who seeks knowledge, or to answer the question of what there is out there in the world. The paradigm of our role here, to adapt a Marxist adage, is simply one of seeking to know the world.

But then, as you may recall from the last lecture, we may also presume to wonder, letting our sense of perplexity carry us further, whether the real question is not what there is, but what we want there to be—or what we see before us, as defined by our purposes. Here the paradigm we posit of our role in the world is not that of registering cognitively what there is before us but how to make a difference to the world—of changing it, to complete that Marxist adage. In other words, we are looking here not to be an audience but to be *actors!* More boldly, perhaps, we are looking here to find that magic wand by which we ourselves can call a black swan into being, or by which we can make that creative leap with the help of what Retallack calls “a poethical wager,” in the arts as in human affairs more generally, thus breaking patterns, creating our own swerves, interrupting some natural or automatic process or routine, in short, or paraphrased, by authoring a miracle! This, after all, by all accounts, especially now, is what the Israeli-Palestinian conflict needs: a miracle—but of our own making!

On this point, here is how Arendt addresses us: “It is not in the least superstitious, it is even a council of realism,” she tells us, “to look for the unforeseeable and unpredictable, to be prepared for and to expect ‘miracles’ in the political realm. And the more heavily the scales are weighted

in favor of disaster, the more miraculous will the deed done in freedom appear.”³¹

Everything in the world of nature, Arendt reminds us, echoing Epicurus and his quirky atoms, its very texture of physical and biological reality, is constituted by miracles, or improbable events. So why not also look upon the realm of human affairs in this light? And then she continues, almost using existentialist language: “The decisive difference between the ‘infinite improbabilities’ on which the reality of our earthly life rests and the miraculous character inherent in those events which establish historical reality,” she tells us, “is that, in the realm of human affairs, we know the author of the ‘miracles.’ It is men who perform them—men who because they have received the twofold gift of freedom and action can establish a reality of their own.”³²

Once again, Arendt focuses on public space and associates freedom with that political structure in which men can create their own realities. Freedom *in* politics, rather than freedom *from* politics, being her motto, the *raison d'être* of politics, that is, of a political leviathan, is freedom rather than—as other thinkers have suggested—life, or security (that is, freedom in the negative sense of being freedom from fear), or self-interest. Note here that to posit life or security or self-interest as an objective of politics is to emphasize protective, defensive, or even, as in the case of interest, biologically or economically determinist motivations. To emphasize freedom, on the other hand, is to emphasize creativity, or to posit Man as a creator of realities.

Arendt identifies Saint Augustine as being the source of the ideological articulation of the Christian (and later philosophic) preoccupation with freedom as an attribute of the will (expanding on Saint Paul's dilemma of having the will but not the disposition to perform that which is good). Paradoxically, though, she also identifies him as being the source of articulation of its political meaning in classical antiquity, where “freedom is conceived not as inner human disposition but as a character of human existence in the world.”³³ In this latter case, she tells us, Augustine draws more on his Roman rather than his Christian roots, equating the act of foundation of Rome with what freedom is, or freedom, therefore, with beginning, and Man's freedom, therefore, with Man's beginning, as

31. Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” 460.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*, 457.

miracle, forever reenacted, forever renewed. We can here pick out, almost word for word, not only Heidegger but even Sartre in his “Existentialism Is Humanism.”³⁴

At this point, Arendt transcends Augustine, and reaches all the way back to Jesus of Nazareth! It is in the sayings of Jesus of Nazareth, in those parts of the New Testament, that we find “an extraordinary understanding of freedom, and particularly of the power inherent in human freedom; but the human capacity which corresponds to this power, which, in the words of the Gospel, is capable of removing mountains, is not will, but *faith*. The work of faith, actually, its product, is what the gospels called ‘miracles.’” Arendt then continues to tell us that what all miracles have in common, “those performed by men no less than those performed by a divine agent,” is that they are “interruptions of some natural series of events, of some automatic process, in whose context they constitute the wholly unexpected.”³⁵

In short, then, by identifying freedom as an attribute of human action, and this as a constant source of interruptive and unexpected possibilities within an automatic process, Arendt provides us with an account according to which, with faith in our own capability—what I suggest might be called “secular faith”—acting as the source of power for our actions, we can perform miracles, making what seems impossible, or contrary to the known facts, come true.

Arendt’s concept of faith faintly echoes what Sartre calls an “existentialist commitment,” where, as each man sets out to define himself, he chooses what is better, and in so doing thus chooses what is better for Man. But whereas this humanist dimension is faint in Sartre, it occupies political center stage in Arendt as a vivid mechanism for political action, and faith in acts-as-miracles immediately comes to assume a political transformational power unprecedented in existentialist literature. Furthermore,

34. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, translated by Philip Mairet (Brooklyn: Haskell House, 1977), available at <http://www.cis.vt.edu/modernworld/d/Sartre.html>. There are clear likenesses in “thought patterns” with various themes in Sartre’s essay, including the existentialist theme of man being an inventor of himself, or the other theme distinguishing between, for example, virtue as an undefined form and a specific or instantiated virtue as an actual end pursued by man in a specific context (Arendt picks up this theme when choosing Montesquieu’s principles as free-action guidelines—see below). Sartre associates himself in this essay/lecture (as an existentialist atheist) with Heidegger (with whom Arendt studied and maintained a close relationship), who is mentioned by Berlin as having been of major influence on her thought (Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*). However, Arendt herself nowhere, to my knowledge, presents herself as an existentialist.

35. Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” 457 (emphasis added), 458.

by way of helping us appreciate the manner and strength of this transformational power, Arendt's reference to Jesus of Nazareth is extremely poignant, for, drawing on the example of such historical giants, we can imagine faith to function as a source of transformational power in two interrelated ways: both as an inner source of strength empowering the individual with what it takes to make a leap into the unknown as well as a source of magnetic attraction to others as such an individual slowly comes to assume the role of a paradigm, a model for others to follow, or a leader. The more people come to share the faith, the greater the power. We can imagine how in such a situation the power to "move mountains" can grow exponentially.

Herein consists, anyway, analogously to the way a prayer for a miracle is explicable in a religious model, an explanation for how someone believing in predestination, or some other brand of determinism, but not in God, can nevertheless see another future outcome for what she believes is predestined, namely, her additional belief in human miracles: that side by side with her base belief in predestination, she harbors the additional belief in the ever-present possibility of a black swan that can be called into being, or in a poetic wager that can change the world, whether by an act or a series of acts she carries out, or can be carried out by others but reinforced through her own support. Believing in miracles in this context works just as well for nonreligious as for religious determinists. A political agent in Arendt's sense, or someone being truly free and having faith in their capability, is a perfect example of a miracle worker of this kind. Arendt, in other words, would certainly have agreed with me that it was totally within the power of Olmert and Abbas to write their own history!

But not everyone agrees. During a talk given to Palestinians last month by Robert Serri, the special envoy of the United Nations general-secretary to the so-called Quartet—the four-party international group entrusted with overseeing the Mideast peace process—a highly skeptical and "knowledgeable" audience listened disbelievingly as the UN envoy insisted that a two-state solution to the conflict was well on its way and will be concluded within months. "But all the signs," a well-informed member of the audience, a law professor, protested, "show on the contrary that we've already stepped over the edge.... The settlements, the settlers' unrestricted rampage against Palestinian farmers harvesting their olive trees, a growing anti-Arab racism manifesting itself in mixed cities even within Israel proper, such as Acca, the desecration of the Aqsa Mosque compound by zealots during Succot, increasing support for the Israeli right: all the objective

facts actually tell us that Oslo—or Annapolis—is dead. What you're telling us is not just far removed from reality: it is totally off the map."

So here we are once again confronted with a question: is what Serri sees part of reality, or is it totally off the map? This question requires us to address another item, besides freedom, miracles, and secular faith, that we have already come across but is not fully developed in the Arendt account, namely, vision: what does someone who believes in predestination *see* when she sets out to make the impossible come true? I would claim here that she trains herself to have a "double vision": on the one hand, she sees what everyone else around her also sees; on the other hand, she sees how *that*, through her own action, can be made different. Since its different form is just as much what she can see as what the others see, its realization comes to be no less predestined than anything else that can be seen, including what she herself sees in her other vision! To be a visionary, in other words, is not to be diseased or demented; it is simply to have better (or multiple) vision.

At the outset of this lecture, in talking about our Welsh fox, I described a two-part image of sensing and acting, that is, of sensing danger, for example, and acting upon that sensation. I have spent the better part of this lecture on what a free act might mean. On the other hand, I have also been trying, throughout my presentation, not so much to undermine the objectivist thesis that things are what they are but to make room also for the twin thesis that they are what we want them to be. In the fox's case, sensing danger amounts to "seeing" one future scenario, and therefore being impelled to create another. A provocative way of putting this is to say that while the predestined future is a universe packed with contradictions, the present is a factory where many of those contradictions are constantly being resolved. If someone were to protest here that contradictions by definition do not exist, it can be retorted that neither does the future. All there is of the future is our vision, or multiple visions, of it. That is precisely why a fox foretelling doom works with determination to avoid it.

But even that is not all. Drawing a line between present and future perhaps allows us to see our way through one puzzle, but the truth is that nothing, but absolutely nothing, can be so divided. If time, as we say, does not stand still, then nothing in it stands still, either. Everything must also be in constant flux. This oft-repeated adage is a mind-boggling notion: it requires us to try to imagine that what one (as a fixed point in time and space) looks at is spread out, so to speak, mostly in invisible domains, part as memory in the past, but part as unactualized future. Yet we somehow

con ourselves into believing that what we see at a given moment is what there is through time, that *it* is the original, the genuine article, or that as we look at it, we see all of it, or we see it *whole*, all of its other parts, memory and what is yet to be actualized being somehow present in it *here* and *now*. And it is based on this fiction, perhaps, that we find ourselves in trouble trying to get what one philosopher called “a cognitive fix” on it—in his analysis, this being the point of contention in the different manners of how one then presumes to refer to it or to talk about it.³⁶ But the mind-boggling truth may be that our problem lies not with the cloudiness of the linguistic manners of referring to objects in the world as much as with those objects themselves, our language, perhaps, having far more performative power than we assume!³⁷

No wonder why so many of us, like Mr. Jones, feel dumbfounded by what we see. What is a wonder is that there are not many more of us. Surely there is a fundamental problem of identifying what it is we have before us in the world, or of getting a cognitive fix on what there is—say, on Israel, for example. Both Ambassador Serri and his Palestinian audience (as well as our Welsh fox, by the way) are looking at something, or an amalgam of things, that is interwoven into past, present, and future, and concluding, understandably, that they see different things! Ambassador Serri, like the fox, senses a wave or danger pattern that can be broken. The skeptical audience, like Tolstoy, thinks they are seeing part of an inexorable, unbreakable flow of history. There is, significantly, an implicit agreement between all of them that what they are seeing is not all of what they are looking at—that what they are looking at has an invisible future extension. What they disagree on is partly what they are looking at, partly what its extension looks like, and why it should look one way or another.

And this last part takes us back to acting, or to what our role in the world is. Right at the beginning of my last lecture, I distinguished in passing between “knowing” the world and “appreciating its complexity.” In the

36. Wettstein, *Magic Prism*.

37. It is generally recognized by now that many of our words are not “just words” but acts as well, or what some acts simply are. The “ontological” thesis being developed here (see also below) is that our referential problems may in fact result not from a lack of linguistic precision with regard to what there is but from a lack of recognition of the conventional power of the language we use, our expressions being themselves the markers of what there is, instead of being seen as the linguistic mirror of what exists (in a sense, reversing the “in the beginning was the word” dictum into becoming “in the word was the beginning”). For example, “being a Zionist” can be said to mean “being inclined to settle in Hebron, alongside the patriarchs, no matter what,” or it can be said to mean “to live in a Jewish state, no matter whether Hebron is a part.” The claim being made here is that what “being a Zionist” or “Zionism” means is a matter of convention, not of discovery.

first case, one's epistemic state is that of someone—an explorer or a hedgehog—searching for the truth, where the assumption is that it lies out there in the world, waiting to be discovered or to be found. In the second case, one's epistemic state is that of an actor, an artist, a sculptor, a founder, in any case someone out to make something happen rather than just simply to find it already made—often cast, in the minds of many, in unbreakable alloy. A person informed by the second epistemic state throughout their life relies less on the question “What do I know?” as on the question “What do I see?” because it is how one sees the world that allows for working miracles.

Consider, returning to Arendt, what acting freely (or miracle working) in her view means, in particular in relation to the cognitive faculty. She first reminds us of the classical Duns Scotus formula for how will and action are related: “Action insofar as it is determined is guided by a future aim whose desirability the intellect has grasped before the will wills it, whereby the intellect calls upon the will, since only the will can dictate action.” One feels, reading this account, that one is looking at something very rigid, very linear, like a two-dimensional representation on a cave wall, before perspective was introduced. Arendt, in contrast, wishes to free action both from the will, as we already said, and from the grasp of the intellect. “Insofar as it is free,” Arendt argues, “action is neither under the guidance of the intellect nor under the dictate of the will—although it needs both for the execution of any particular goal—but springs from something altogether different which (... following Montesquieu's analysis of forms of government...) I shall call a principle.”³⁸

The interesting aspect (for our purposes) of Arendt's appeal here to Montesquieu's principles—whether love or hatred, fame or fear, love of excellence or of equality—is that they are not objects of intellection, first cognized in full array and then desired, but an inspirational source for action that by themselves are too general to prescribe a particular goal (though an act can be judged in retrospect in light of the principle that inspired it). Arendt's invocation of general principles in this context once again echoes Sartre's, for whom a particular value is also actualized only through an act. Furthermore, “unlike the judgement of the intellect which precedes action... the inspiring principle becomes fully manifest only in the performing act itself”—whence also freedom appears.³⁹ One might

38. Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” 445.

39. *Ibid.*

rephrase this by saying that one is inspired in the first instance to act by how one wants to change what one sees, for better or for worse, rather than by what one knows. This, in any case, would be action for Arendt insofar as it is free. And this, indeed, seems to be a very commonsense observation of how and why human beings in general act as they do, not only on the grand stage of history, as it were, but even in their more humble day-to-day affairs, and it is a very commonsense explanation, therefore, of why things happen in the world of human affairs the way they do—both the good and the bad.

The bad, alas, much more readily than the good, because it can be brought about more simply, thus making us more inclined to believe in the possibility of its issuance from a leader than in the issuance of the good. Thus, while no one ever questions the capacity of any Israeli leader to launch a war against Israel's neighbors, or even against Iran, his capacity to conclude a peace agreement with the Palestinians is held in doubt—tragically, perhaps even by the person herself. And when Prime Minister Olmert declared war on Lebanon last year, observers just noted the folly of the adventure, not its extraordinary or “miraculous” nature. But it seemed almost impossible for them to believe he could sign a peace agreement with Abbas in Annapolis!

Well, I started out by saying that mine was not, I hoped, an idle epistemic pursuit but would be a practical pursuit in search for that skill—if human nature allowed for it—by which we can end, even prevent, wars from happening. And now it is clear that, contrary even to how Freud answered Einstein on being asked that question, my contention is that wars can be ended simply by the courageous action of free individuals.⁴⁰ The uniformly evolving nature of Freud's psychological determinism, if one can call it that, can easily be broken by a miracle, for which faith is needed, for which a vision of a better world can be the inspiration. Faith, I wish to insist, is not in the least like optimism. The latter may be, like its opposite, pessimism, the state of mind of an armchair observer. To be a miracle worker, on the other hand, one need be a worker, an actor, not an observer, an audience.

40. On being requested by the newly formed League of Nations to set up and lead a body of world-class intellectuals who might assist world leaders in charting a future political course, Einstein instituted a correspondence with Freud on the question of wars. Why do wars break out, he more or less asked him, and how can they be prevented from happening? Freud's response, from *Einstein of Peace*, edited by Otto Nathan and Heinz Norden (New York: Schocken Books, 1960), 186–203, can be located at <http://www.cis.vt.edu/modernworld/einstein.html>.

It may be worthy of note here, recalling those post-Aristotelian anti-essentialist Muslim philosophers who claimed that a thing's *oneness*, its existence, as well as its essence are all a posteriori and not an essential property of it, as well as those Muslim atomist dialecticians who denied the Aristotelian notion of infinite matter, that for all of them the search for a logical explanation for the concept of miracles was always the inspiration. Epicurean atomism, complete with its theory about quirks or swerves, may have lent itself more readily as an explanatory model for divine miracles than did the more obscure doctrine of antiessentialism. But the latter breached open a pathway for human agency, in a sense presaging existentialism, and in any case providing us with a theoretical model or a basis for what one might call constructive or functional epistemology, or the theory that things are as it suits our purposes for them to be.

So, to return to our original question, is what we see before us one war, bound to cease only when one side or the other has been totally crushed? It certainly could be, if we make it so. Indeed, our follies can easily make it so. Israelis and Palestinians can make existential enemies of each other and continue to fight to the bitter end. But likewise, they are equally capable of making peace between them. This they can partly do if they come to realize that it is they who are in charge of their lives, if anybody is, for better or for worse. Being in charge of their lives, they can define who or what they are. They can so define themselves, for example, as to entrench the other as an existential enemy, or they can so define themselves as to transform the other from being an enemy to becoming a friend. The point is, identities are made, not given. And the beauty of it all is, one has the power to shape not only one's own identity but also that of the other.