chapter one

Thinking about Thinking

Sometimes we look at things like we are looking through a dark lens and everything seems dark. Let's try putting on different glasses.

Robert Leahy[1]

Look at the bright side, but don't look too long, or you'll be blinded.

Emily Stern

[W]hen faced with a difficult question, we often answer an easier one instead, usually without noting the substitution … [W]e can be blind to the obvious, and we are also blind to our blindness … [I]t is easier to recognize other people's mistakes than our own.

Daniel Kahneman[2]

A basic principle of moral psychology is that "morality binds and blinds."

Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt[3]

In 2016 my friend Roger Berkowitz, head of Bard College's Hannah Arendt Center, asked for my help. He was organizing a two-day conference around "Difficult Questions about Race, Sex, and Religion," and was having trouble finding thoughtful pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian panelists.

I suggested Kenneth Marcus of the Brandeis Center for the pro-Israel slot. Even though Marcus and I frequently disagreed, particularly as I explain in chapter 7 about the use of Title VI of the

Civil Rights Act to address certain pro-Palestinian campus speech, I considered him a smart advocate. His organization provided legal support for pro-Israel campus advocacy.

Marcus accepted the invitation. Then Dima Khalidi, head of Palestine Legal, which helps pro-Palestinian students and faculty, agreed to speak. When Marcus learned that Khalidi and he would be on the stage together, he said no. Both Berkowitz and I tried to convince him that sharing a platform would be wise; he could confront her directly. He still refused, noting my long-standing objection to appearing alongside a Holocaust denier. I pointed out the differences. Holocaust deniers are antisemites who distort history and science to defame Jews. They shouldn't be debated, not because they have another perspective, but because of what such a joint appearance necessarily communicates. Deniers win just by being seen together with historians, survivors, or experts, because they want to create the illusion that there's a reasonable disagreement between points of view – those who allege that the Holocaust happened, and those who say it did not.[4] This is substantially different than being a zealous advocate for one side or another in a heated political debate. I told Marcus that even though I disagreed with Khalidi about many things, perhaps most things, she was a respected lawyer and an advocate for a political position, about which reasonable people may disagree.

Marcus said she was an "antisemitism denier." There is no doubt that Marcus's definition of antisemitism is different from Khalidi's; indeed, for their political purposes, Marcus's seems artificially expansive and Khalidi's artificially constricted.

Knowing that Berkowitz was facing a deadline and had no good options, I suggested Marcus and Khalidi speak one after the other. While not ideal, both could articulate their positions. I hadn't thought my suggestion through. It became obvious that the discussion about Israel and Palestine on campus was structured differently from any other session – two separate speakers, as opposed to a conversation between opposing views, like on race and sex. Before Marcus spoke (with me as introducer and moderator), Berkowitz told the audience that Marcus had a principled position against appearing with Khalidi, and that's why they would

speak separately. A student challenged Marcus, asking, "Who gets to decide that you don't have to listen to another person, you don't have to share space with another person … In my experience … it's not always an option to opt out of a difficult conversation or sharing space with someone you don't want to share space with."[5]

For Marcus, having a debate with Khalidi was not a "difficult conversation" but an impossible one. Having a civil dialogue with someone who represented activists of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), who generally have a hostile view of Zionism, was simply too much.

In May 2018, a student group at Stony Brook University celebrated Israel's seventieth birthday with an information table and free food. The event was supported by the campus Hillel. Some members of Students for Justice in Palestine protested. They held signs saying "Zionism is terrorism."[6] Rakia Syed, an SJP member, told the student newspaper, "Palestinians have been suffering, and … peace cannot truly be achieved until Israel is out of the region and out of Palestine … We want Zionism off this campus, so we want Hillel off this campus. What we want is a proper Jewish organization that allows Jews to express their faith, have sabbath – everything like that, that are not Zionists, that doesn't support Israel."[7]

The Interfaith Center at the university, disturbed by Syed's comment, issued a statement: "While we do not expect students or student organizations to agree with everything that other groups stand for or advocate or believe, we do expect that they respect the rights of those students to observe their faith, hold by their beliefs, and celebrate their identity on our campus."[8] One of the signatories was the campus's Muslim chaplain, Sanaa Nadim. SJP then accused her of "a heinous level of betrayal to the Palestinian people by working with and aiding Zionists on their endeavors … [I]f there were Nazis, white nationalists and KKK members on campus, would their identity have to be accepted and respected? Absolutely not. Then why would we respect the view of Zionists?"[9]

Both Marcus and the Stony Brook chapter of SJP viewed their opponents as beyond the pale. Many people who care about this conflict seem addicted to strong emotions and absolutist positions,

and allergic to reasoned discussion. And these are smart people – college students, faculty, and professionals.

The problem is not necessarily what they, or we, think about the conflict. It starts with something more basic, something we rarely take time to consider, something I hope you keep in mind as you read the rest of this book: how we as human beings process information and come to conclusions, based on who we are, especially when our identity is tethered to an issue of perceived social justice or injustice. We like to believe we are rational beings, and to an extent we are. But our minds are focused on, and driven by, not only logic but also feelings, emotions, and attitudes. We are Captain Kirk, not Mr. Spock.

This chapter is a brief introduction to aspects of the emerging field of Hate Studies,* and particularly its disciplinary components of evolutionary psychology, social psychology, and moral psychology. It is not meant to be an exhaustive analysis of the issue, but rather a brief and incomplete introduction and a framing, a short overview about how we think, especially about hot-button issues.

Our ancestral past helps define how we identify and think about ingroups and outgroups.

James Waller is a social psychologist and leading expert in genocide and Holocaust studies, who now teaches at Keene State College. In a landmark essay on evolutionary psychology for the *Journal of Hate Studies*, he showed how our attitudes – instincts perhaps – are shaped by our ancestral past. "Automobiles," he writes, "kill far more people today than do spiders or snakes. But people are far more averse to spiders and snakes than they are to automobiles. Why? Because for most of our ancestral history, spiders and snakes were a serious threat to our survival

* Hate Studies is defined as "Inquiries into the human capacity to define, and then dehumanize or demonize, an 'other,' and the processes which inform and give expression to, or can curtail, control, or combat, that capacity" (Stern, "The Need for an Interdisciplinary Field of Hate Studies," 11).

and reproduction, whereas automobiles did not exist ... EP [evolutionary psychology] makes clear that our universal reasoning circuits inject certain motivations into our mental life that directly influence our behavior."[10]

Our brains were not developed in an age of jet travel, Skype, and Twitter. They were formed over millennia, starting when people lived in small groups, and survived by hunting and gathering. Sometimes our primitive ancestors confronted strangers, others. Frequently these "others" were dangerous. They competed for resources. In all cultures, even today, people feel as if they belong to some group, and define other groups as separate, some even deserving of animosity, if not suspicion and hatred.[11]

Waller writes:

> Human minds are compelled to define the limits of the tribe ... We construct this knowledge by categorizing others as "us" or "them." We tend to be biased toward "us" and label "them" – those with whom "we" share the fewest genes and least culture – as enemies ...
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> A group of the !Kung San of Kalahari call themselves by a name that literally means "the real people." In their language, the words for "bad" and "foreign" are one and the same. Similarly, the cannibal inhabitants of the delta area of Irian in Indonesian New Guinea call themselves the Asmat, which means "the people – the human beings." All outsiders are known very simply as Manowe – "the edible ones."[12]

We are hardwired to be ethnocentric, to focus on our own group, in Waller's words, as the "right one": our group is better, other groups don't measure up, and may be dangerous to our survival.[13] Ethnocentric impulses have been documented across cultures, and are evidenced at an early age.[14] We see them in our daily news feeds, and on our sports pages. But, Waller notes, "defining what the in-group is also requires defining what it is not."[15] In other words, we are both ethnocentric and xenophobic (fearing others),[16] although there is evidence that the two phenomena are also somewhat independent (a person can favor their ingroup and discriminate against an outgroup without animus towards the latter), and that the affinity to one's ingroup is the stronger force.[17]

If you are in a room full of strangers, and someone flips a coin and divides the group in two, once a group identity is formed, experiments show that you will likely believe your group's members are better than the others', even though you know the assignment to your group was totally random.[18]

We're pre-programmed to think that way. In 1954 Muzafer Sherif conducted an experiment with twelve-year-old boys. They were as similar as he could find – white, middle class, from intact homes, Protestant. He brought them to a summer camp at a place called Robbers Cave State Park, in Oklahoma. Two groups were created, with each not knowing that the other existed. Each bonded as a unit. One called itself the Eagles, the other the Rattlers. Over time, the campers discovered they were not alone. As one chronicler of the experiment summarized:

> Sherif now arranged … [a] series of competitive activities (e.g. baseball, tug-of-war etc.) [between the groups] with a trophy being awarded on the basis of accumulated team score …
>
> The Rattlers' reaction to the informal announcement of a series of contests was absolute confidence in their victory! They spent the day talking about the contests and making improvements on the ball field, which they took over as their own to such an extent that they spoke of putting a Keep Off sign there! They ended up putting their Rattler flag on the pitch. At this time, several Rattlers made threatening remarks about what they would do if anybody from [t]he Eagles bothered their flag …
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> At first, this prejudice was only verbally expressed, such as taunting or name-calling. As the competition wore on … [t]he Eagles burned the Rattler's flag. Then … the Rattler's [sic] ransacked The Eagle's [sic] cabin, overturned beds, and stole private property. The groups became so aggressive with each other that the researchers had to physically separate them.
>
> During the subsequent two-day cooling off period, the boys listed features of the two groups. The boys tended to characterize their own ingroup in very favorable terms, and the other out-group in very unfavorable terms.
>
> Keep in mind that the participants in this study were well-adjusted boys, not street gang members. This study clearly shows that conflict

> between groups can trigger prejudice [sic] attitudes and discriminatory behavior.[19]

What could reduce the animosity between the Rattlers and the Eagles? Towards the end of the experiment they were forced to work together to fix the camp's drinking water supply – if they didn't cooperate, the problem could not be remedied. They had a "superordinate" goal, and sure enough working together led to a reduction in the negative stereotypes about the other group. Or perhaps, in some way, working together led to the formation of a larger, transcendent group identity.

While one can criticize aspects of this experiment,[20] the import of it seems as relevant today as it was in the 1950s. People form groups, and when they do they have positive prejudices about their group, and negative ones about the "other" group, especially if that group is seen in competition. We will see many examples of this phenomenon as we examine the campus battles between pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian advocates.

There is recent scholarship that adds another layer of understanding to our impulse to form ingroups and outgroups. "Uncertainty-identity theory" suggests that "feelings of uncertainty about one's perceptions, attitudes, values or feelings can be uncomfortable and thus motivate behavior aimed at reducing uncertainty … Self-uncertainty is powerfully motivating because people need to know who they are, how to behave and what to think, and who others are and how they might behave, think and treat us."[21]

Michael Hogg is a leading scholar of this theory. He recognizes that all of us have multiple identities (for instance, I'm a man, a husband, a father, a Jew, a Bard College alum, a beleaguered New York Knicks fan, etc.). Some identities are more important to us than others, and some of the groups with which we identify, the ones Hogg calls "low entitativity groups," have "unclear boundaries, ambiguous membership criteria, limited shared goals and poorly defined group attitudes."[22] Higher entitativity groups, ones that "have sharp boundaries, are internally homogenous, and have a clear structure with shared goals and a common fate," are "better … at reducing uncertainty as they provide a more

prominently focused social identity that delivers a clearer sense of who we are as group members, and thus how we should behave."[23]

The attraction to "high entitativity groups," Hogg argues, is "extremitized when the group is organized around an identity and set of goals that are under threat."[24] Religion fits here. It is well-suited to reduce people's feelings of uncertainty. Hogg describes it as a "group phenomenon involving group norms that specify beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviors relating to both sacred and secular aspects of life, which are integrated and imbued with meaning by an ideological framework and worldview."[25]

Religion also provides its true believers "impermeable and carefully policed boundaries and markedly ethnocentric intergroup attitudes. Internal dissent and criticism would be discouraged and punished; consensus and uniformity would be enforced ... [along with] dehumanization of out-groups and in-group dissenters ... Ideological orthodoxy prevails and is protected by suppression of criticism and marginalization of deviance."[26]

Recall Rachel Sandalow-Ash's observation that Jewish students at Hillel can comfortably navigate different levels of religious observance, but not strong differences about Israel, and AJC's insistence on staff attending the Salute to Israel Parade. There is reason to believe that for many Jews, attachment to Israel is perhaps the strongest aspect of group association, the core part of their Jewish identity, frequently grounded in religious terms, and expressed by some as strongly pro-Israel (mostly), and by others as anti-Zionism.

When we look at the heated campus conflict over the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, it is helpful to think of the strongest proponents on each side who seek to dehumanize[27] the other side, or at least chill their speech. They are acting in ways Hogg's uncertainty theory predicts – they tend to be more strident, more connected to their group, more extreme, and to exhibit the zealotry of true believers.

Add to that one more element, the tendency of people who define themselves as part of a group to depersonalize others and themselves. Hogg writes:

> [We] depersonalize them in terms of their group's prototype, viewing them stereotypically and creating stereotype-consistent expectations

> about their attitudes and behavior. When we categorize ourselves, precisely the same process occurs; we depersonalize ourselves in term of our in-group prototype ... [W]e conform to and internalize group norms, define ourselves in group terms, and feel a sense of belonging and identification with our group.[28]

This identification is so strong that we feel pain when someone in our group fails, but take pleasure when someone in a rival group fails.[29]

Symbols, often of no intrinsic value, have outsized importance when we think about ingroups and outgroups.

One source of tension between the Eagles and the Rattlers was over symbols – each group's flag. These were newly minted pieces of cloth. Yet each group became fiercely attached to its symbol, and intended harm to their opponent's. This is not an entirely rational process. It has much more to do with identity.[30] Now imagine how intense and extreme the conflict and prejudice between the two groups of twelve-year-olds might have been if their fathers and grandfathers had attended the same camp, and the current campers had grown up knowing its flag and seeing their family's respect for it. Think about the power that symbols of identity have in our own lives, and in history. The American flag (and the anger at those who might burn it). The power of the swastika in Nazi Germany.

Now think of the dichotomy of the Israeli flag, sporting the Star of David. It is a source of historic pride to Jews worldwide, many of whom were (and in some places still are) either oppressed for displaying that symbol, or forced to wear it by regimes that intended them harm. But it's also a permanent reminder to non-Jews in Israel that their place in the state is lesser. On the American campus, pro-Israeli students sometimes literally drape themselves in the Israeli flag, while pro-Palestinian students have been known to rip it down.[31]

Symbols are important and people will fight over them to the point where they lose themselves and their ability to think, even if the symbols are demonstrably unimportant for any practical purpose. Years ago, when I was a young trial lawyer advocating for American Indian activists, I joined them in trying to retire racist sports team mascots, from professional teams on down to elementary schools. Some schools with Indian mascots were nicknamed "the Savages."

Social scientists showed that American Indian children suffered from the presence of these mascots. Imagine how black kids would feel if Americans cheered for the football team the "Washington Niggers" (which for some is akin to "Redskin"),[32] or Jewish kids if there was a baseball team called the "Cleveland Kikes," each with cartoonish caricatures and trinkets demeaning ethnicity or religion.

Charlene Teters, an American Indian graduate student at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, spoke out against the school's mascot after she saw her children, who insisted on going to a basketball game, shrink into their seats and themselves as they watched this prancing, dancing fake "Chief" abusing what they held sacred, including eagle feathers. For raising the issue, Teters received death threats.[33]

A conference was organized to explain why the university should choose a new mascot, and how the reasons alums put forward for retaining "The Chief," such as that it honored American Indians, were not only disingenuous but also demonstrably false (depictions of "The Chief" were being sold on toilet paper). In the middle of my presentation, about how we'd never tolerate similar treatment of Jews, blacks, Hispanics, or any other ethnic group, I wondered out loud about why people chose to attend the University of Illinois. They came for many reasons. It has a good faculty. Having a degree from here would help a graduate find a job. Location. Tuition. I suggested a top ten list of why someone would choose to spend tens of thousands of dollars on tuition at this university. I was sure that "having a cool mascot" would not appear among the choices. Yet the resistance to changing the mascot was fierce. Why were people holding on to it so strongly, to the point where there

were death threats against Charlene, and promises from alumni to stop supporting the university if it changed its mascot?

The debate really wasn't about the mascot as much as it was about us and our identities. People were being asked to give up a part of their memories of their group, which were embodied in a symbol. Evidence that they would get past such a change, as fans of the Redmen of St. John's University did when their sports teams' name was changed to the Red Storm, didn't appear to matter. Keeping this emotional symbol seemed important, even essential, perhaps even more important than whether their team would win or lose on the field. Much of the campus battle over Israel/Palestine, which also devolves into death threats and alumni promises to punish their alma mater financially, plays out as a war over symbols.

We have a proclivity to follow authority, and we are susceptible to peer pressure. We conform. Partisans in the campus debate over Israel and Palestine are not exempt from these human tendencies.

When people think about a divisive and difficult issue like the Israel/Palestine conflict, they're not thinking on a blank slate defined by disconnected and philosophical logic. They are bringing themselves as human beings, for whom identity, and the symbols of identity, are of oversized importance. They have an ancestral impulse to see, define, and diminish an "other," especially when that "other" represents some real or perceived danger to one's group.

But that's only the beginning of how we think about difficult issues like this. Social psychology teaches us about our individual proclivities to follow authority, and how we are influenced by the actions of others.

Stanley Milgram conducted perhaps the best known experiment about respect for authority.[34] As Evan Harrington summarizes in the *Journal of Hate Studies*:

> Milgram invited ordinary people from the community to participate in an experiment involving a learner, whose task was to memorize

> various word combinations, and a teacher, who was to administer painful electric shocks when the learner gave wrong answers. The experiment was rigged so that subjects always were placed in the role of teacher and a mild-mannered middle-aged man (working for Milgram) always was placed in the role of learner. Subjects saw the learner strapped into a chair with electrical conductors taped to his arms ... In fact, no shocks were ever given to the learner. Very soon after the experiment began the learner would begin making errors, and the teacher (i.e., the true experimental subject) would be required to give electric shocks of increasing intensity by flipping switches on a highly realistic-appearing sham shockbox designed by Milgram. The learner, seated behind a partition in another room, would make verbal protests of increasing intensity as the intensity of the "shocks" grew. In fact, the learner's screams and protests were tape recordings ... If at any point the teacher refused to continue, another actor pretending to be the experimenter ... would say various phrases to the effect that the experiment required that he or she continue to administer shocks to the learner. If the teacher became concerned about the learner's health, the experimenter would say that he would take full responsibility and that the teacher should continue with the experiment.[35]

Almost two-thirds of the subjects continued to administer the "shocks." And even in a later experiment, when the subjects weren't just pressing a button but had to hold the "learner's" hand directly to the shock plate, almost a third gave the highest level of shock. "It was a very disturbing sight," Milgram said, "since the victim resists strenuously and emits cries of agony."[36]

Milgram's work has been criticized, both for its morality and its authenticity.[37] But his observations have been replicated in other studies.[38] We tend to follow authority, even when we question the wisdom or morality of that authority. Imagine how much more pronounced this tendency would be if the authority was someone who represented a core aspect of our identity. Like someone perceived to be a strong voice standing up for the Jews of Israel, or for the Palestinians. We might abstractly question the wisdom or morality of what that person says or does, but we are less likely to criticize that person than someone on the "other side."

Our thinking process is also influenced by what we see others do. We look to the group for affirmation. Sometimes we are influenced more by the group than by our own thinking. We feel peer pressure, and worry about disapproval.

In the 1950s Solomon Asch conducted a landmark experiment in group conformity and social norms. The subject was the last to be seated in a room, around a long table. Everyone else worked with Asch. Easy questions were asked, such as which of two lines of obvious different lengths was longer. The subject was the last to reply.

Harrington describes what happened:

> After making a choice, each person at the table was required to say out loud which line he thought was correct. In this way the real subject was placed in a position in which he knew the answers of the rest of the group, and they would know his. The first two trials went smoothly and all confederates picked the correct comparison line. However, as the experiment progressed, all the confederates began making the same wrong comparisons. The true subject was faced with a dilemma: Should he bravely go against the group and declare the correct answer (which was obvious)? Or should he play it safe and go along with the majority? Across 12 trials 76% of subjects went along with the group and gave an obviously incorrect response at least once (approximately one-third of the subjects could be considered frequent conformers by giving many incorrect answers) … When one confederate in the group went against the majority and gave the correct answer, the real subject (apparently emboldened by the rebellious confederate) also gave the correct answer more frequently. Asch believed these results indicated that people do not blindly follow crowds, but rather rationally weigh the amount of disapproval they expect to face …[39]

When we think about issues that resonate with our identity (as campus partisans do about the Israel/Palestine conflict), our thinking is influenced by our innate tendencies as humans: defining an ingroup and an outgroup, having a proclivity to listen to authority, being affected by social norms and how other people think, and being susceptible to the power of symbols associated with our group.

It is difficult to think clearly about issues like Israel and Palestine when we see the conflict in binary terms as too many on campus do – good vs. evil, settler-colonialist vs. indigenous, democratic vs. authoritarian, terrorist vs. state terrorist, and so on. How often do we step out of our ingroup or tribal affiliations and imagine what it would be like if we were born to the other team? Why do so few question the wisdom, morality, or utility of the steps "our side" take in the political battle against our opponents?

I teach a class on antisemitism and, of course, I spend a few sessions on Nazism. There's usually a student or two who have a smug reaction to Nazi ideology, essentially defining it as "yucky." How could people think such things, they ask? I respectfully jump down their throats. I tell them that if they had been Germans and had been alive then, they most likely would have been Nazis too. I force them to imagine the reality – Nazism was the norm, something their friends, neighbors, and leaders believed. And it wasn't just an abstract belief, it was sold as noble – protecting the group, including children not yet born, from the dangerous Jews.

There were, of course, people who took chances against their group and the power structure, just as there were white people in the pre–Civil War South who opposed slavery. But they were the exception, who were seen as and treated as traitors. Again, our thinking is deeply impacted by the group. As part of a group, we "deindividualize" and are less likely to act against what the group is trying to achieve, even if we believe the group's behavior is immoral. Our self-awareness becomes less. The potential for hatred of and violence against others becomes greater.[40] We'll see many examples of these tendencies in the Israel/Palestine campus debates, particularly in chapters 5 through 7.

Moral impulses drive our thinking. Partisanship is addictive. We backfill our thinking to justify what we want to believe. We become self-righteous.

In 2012 Jonathan Haidt, who teaches in New York University's business school, wrote *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are*

Divided by Politics and Religion. It's a study on morality, but more deeply it is a treatise about how our minds work. His central thesis is developed with a metaphor: "The mind is divided, like a rider on an elephant, and the rider's job is to serve the elephant."[41] By this Haidt means that our instincts, and our sense of morals, drive us (the elephant). Our minds (rational thought) can influence the elephant to a degree, but for the most part are just along for the ride.

Haidt is a social psychologist, and his early studies were about the role of morality in decision making. He would ask people about scenarios where there was no logical reason to object to an act, such as, "A man goes to the supermarket ... and buys a chicken. But before cooking the chicken, he has sexual intercourse with it. Then he cooks it and eats it." He posits away any rational objection – the chicken is dead, no one knows, no one is hurt. But we still sense a morally objectionable act, and Haidt, with many similar scenarios investigated in different parts of the world, defines a set of morals that he believes are universal, regardless of culture (although how they play out in different cultures varies).

Haidt identified five moral impulses: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity. He found that people who are liberal are more likely to consider care and fairness important principles, whereas conservatives value all five. Nowhere in his book does Haidt zero in on the topic most interesting to me, and relevant to this discussion – hate. But in talking around it, Haidt offers important insights. Here are some of them:

1. "[There are] two different kinds of cognition: intuition and reasoning."[42]
2. "If you ask people to believe something that violates their intuitions, they will devote their efforts to finding an escape hatch – a reason to doubt your argument or conclusion. They will almost always succeed."[43]
3. "People bind themselves into political teams that share moral narratives. Once they accept a particular narrative, they become blind to alternative moral worlds."[44]
4. "When a group of people make something sacred, the members of the cult lose the ability to think clearly about it."[45]

5. "Extreme partisanship may be literally addictive."[46]
6. "The love of loyal teammates is matched by a corresponding hatred of traitors, who are usually considered to be far worse than enemies."[47]
7. "Why do people so readily treat objects (flags, crosses), places (Mecca, a battlefield related to the birth of your nation), people (saints, heroes) and principles (liberty, fraternity, equality) as though they were of infinite value? Whatever its origins, the psychology of sacredness helps bind people into moral communities. When someone in a moral community desecrates one of the sacred pillars supporting the community, the reaction is sure to be swift, emotional, collective and punitive."[48]
8. "Anything that binds people together into a moral matrix that glorifies the in-group *while at the same time demonizing another group* [emphasis in original] can lead to moralistic killing, and many religions are well-suited for that task."[49]

If we are honest with ourselves, we know our political views are not derived from pure, abstract logic. When we take a position on an issue about which we care deeply, we generally prefer a certain outcome. We may not see the other side's case as pure evil, but we tend to discredit it as illogical or contradictory or incomplete, while failing to examine our arguments, to see if they really hold up.

We all do this, some more than others. And all of us backfill our thinking more when we are passionate about an issue that is core to our identities. Perhaps, on some level, being pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian can be described more as a religion than a political position. What each of us believes is a combination of what we feel and what we think. And what we feel drives what we want to think, and the evidence we accept or reject.

When people care deeply about an issue, when they see a moral principle (fairness, caring, loyalty, sanctity, authority) at stake, and when they perceive the survival of their group at risk, this tendency to have intuitions drive what we think becomes supercharged. At its extreme, it is the stuff that makes suicide bombers and soldiers who commit atrocities.

At college I saw a wonderful graffito. It said, "If I didn't believe it with my own mind, I never would have seen it." Over the

decades, I've witnessed this type of myopic thinking repeatedly. It may be more pronounced by those who have given their minds and bodies over to extremist ideologies or theologies, like Holocaust deniers and militia leaders. But it is a way we all look at the world – once we accept a set of beliefs that is important to us, our thinking to a significant degree becomes an exercise to sustain and justify that belief.

When we care deeply about an issue that we see as intertwined with our identity, we tend to make certain symbols and ideas sacred – they have larger than life implications, and are difficult to abandon. As Haidt suggests, there seems to be an addictive quality to our desire to fight for something we make sacred, whether it is dying for the cross, or the Rattlers fighting over their flag, or the reestablishment of a Jewish state in Israel, or the Palestinian right of return.

Daniel Kahneman, a Noble Prize–winner in economics, has an analysis that is similar to Haidt's. Instead of an elephant and a rider, Kahneman says people have a "System 1" and a "System 2." System 1 is our ingrained, quick, intuitive mind. Examples of System 1 include "orient to the source of a sudden sound, complete the phrase 'bread and ...,' answer to 2 + 2 = ?, drive a car on an empty road."[50] System 2 requires thought and concentration, such as "brace for the starter gun in a race, park in a narrow space, fill out a tax form, [what is] 17 × 24?"[51]

Kahneman believes that System 2 is lazy, and we often rely on System 1: "[M]any people are overconfident, prone to place too much faith in their intuitions. They apparently find cognitive effort at least mildly unpleasant and avoid it as much as possible."[52] We "think with [our body], not only with [our] brain," and this mechanism includes the "association of ideas."[53]

Kahneman describes experiments in which participants were given one side, the other side, or both sides of a hypothetical legal controversy. The subjects knew how the experiment was constructed, and those who were presented with one side could have easily discerned the argument of the other. Yet people who saw only one side were "more confident of their judgments than those who saw both sides." Kahneman concluded that it is "the consistency of the information that

matters for a good story, not its completeness ... knowing little makes it easier to fit everything you know into a coherent pattern." He describes this phenomenon as WYSIATI, short for "What you see is all there is."[54]

He argues that System 1, when "searching for an answer to one question ... simultaneously generates the answers to related questions, and it may substitute a response that more easily comes to mind for the one that was requested ... [the one that is] more accessible, computed more quickly and easily."[55]

This tendency Kahneman describes means that we generally don't consider that there are pieces of information that we don't know, but should, before we render a conclusion. And these are conclusions about hypothetical cases presented in a psychology experiment, not ones of ongoing importance, related to our identity, when one might expect our desire to seek out information that conflicts with our perspectives is even less engaged. Indeed, Kahneman says, "System 2 is more of an apologist for the emotions of System 1 than a critic of those emotions – an endorser, rather than an enforcer."[56]

He doesn't directly address the question of whether strong emotions linked to an identity cause different patterns of thinking, but his analysis suggests that this is a strong possibility. He describes how thinking that relies on System 1 can be inconsistent. For example, how people generally are more positive in their outlook when they experience the "brief pleasure of a cool breeze on a hot day," or the strong evidence that a prisoner's chance for parole is increased or decreased depending on when parole judges have breaks for food.[57] Decision making based on "formulas do not suffer from such problems. Given the same input, they will always return the same answer."[58] One has to wonder, do ideologues, who see things in black and white, exhibit more of a tendency to think in formulas, seeking the same answer?

Kahneman also describes "denominator neglect." Here is one example of many: Some people were asked to describe the dangerousness of a disease that "kills 1,286 people out of every 10,000." Others were asked to describe how dangerous "a disease that kills 24.14% of the population" would be. If you do the math, the second

formulation is twice as dangerous as the first. But when people are asked these questions without the opportunity to compare (a System 2 operation), and just react, they rank the first description as the more dangerous.[59]

Even psychiatrists and psychologists are not immune from this instinct to ignore the denominator. Some were told of a psychiatric patient like a "Mr. Jones" who had a 10 per cent chance of committing a violent act if released. Another group was told that of 100 patients, you could expect 10 to act violently. "The professionals who saw the frequency format were almost twice as likely to deny the discharge."[60]

If you're a pro-Israel activist, how often do you demand to see hard numbers of problems described as ubiquitous? For example, an investigation by the newspaper *The Forward* a few years back found fourteen campuses nationwide had an "Israel Apartheid Week" event.[61] While pro-Israel students might feel personally insulted by the verbiage around the event, how alarmed would parents of Jewish college students be if Jewish organizations' fund-raising letters catastrophizing IAW said the probability of any campus having an IAW event is about 0.31 per cent?[62]

Our thinking on moral terms is also influenced by a lack of comparison. People were asked about a man who was injured during a burglary at a store; in one scenario (asked of one group), it was the store where he usually shopped, and in the second (asked of another group), the regular store was closed that day because of a funeral, and he went to a different store.

The group given the scenario where the man goes into another store gave a higher figure for compensation. The damage was the same, but System 1 gave a higher value in this situation, likely adding value to the man's probable regret that he ventured into a different store that day. Yet, as Kahneman reports:

> Almost everyone who sees both scenarios together (with a single subject) endorses the principle that poignancy is not a legitimate consideration. Unfortunately, the principle becomes relevant only when the two scenarios are seen together, and this is not how life usually works. We normally experience life in between-subjects mode, in which contrasting alternatives that might change your mind are absent, and of course

> WYSIATI ["What you see is all there is"]. As a consequence, the beliefs that you endorse when you reflect about morality do not necessarily govern your emotional reactions.[63]

Here's another example, related to how we frame ideas. Kahneman asked physicians about treating lung cancer with either surgery or radiation. Long term, surgery had a better survival rate, but was more dangerous in the short term. Half the physicians were told the "one month survival rate is 90%." The other half were told that "[t]here is a 10% mortality rate in the first month." Surgery was the choice of 84 per cent of those who were asked the question framed around survival. Fifty per cent of those who answered the question framed around mortality would choose radiation instead, even though the description was exactly the same; 90 per cent survival sounds good, 10 per cent mortality scary. The "emotional words" play on System 1.[64]

If you read the primary sources I cite in the endnotes of this book, from advocates on both sides of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, you'll see how they frame their discussions. Pro-Israel groups do not say they are anti-Palestinian, but pro-Palestinian groups are generally seen as anti-Israel. Likewise, pro-Palestinian groups generally do not say they are anti-Israeli, but say Israel supporters are anti-Palestinian. Obviously, this is not as neat a divide as saying 90 per cent survival vs. 10 per cent mortality. But how we frame things plays into the emotional response of System 1 and WYSIATI.

When I speak about antisemitism at synagogues or Jewish Community Centers, people sometimes share their hurt from the shock of antisemitic acts or comments they experienced decades ago. The pain remains fresh. Strong memories related to insults against our core identities also play a part in how we evaluate current events. As Kahneman notes, "The remembering self is sometimes wrong, but it is the one that keeps score and governs what we learn from living, and it is the one that makes decisions."[65]

So when we think about how we think about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict as its partisans battle on campus, we should be aware of our human tendencies, especially two: (1) the desire for, and ease

with which we create, sacred symbols to justify our "fight," and (2) our proclivity to view opinions and positions that challenge our narrative, or worse deny or denigrate our sacred principles, as either biased or hostile. In short, we think emotionally, intuitively, and in a skewed fashion.

Opposing sides in the Israel/Palestine conflict (and campus debates) reflect the "hostile media bias phenomenon," believing the other side gets fairer coverage, which may sway those who are undecided.

In 1985, Stanford University professor Robert Vallone and his colleagues documented the "hostile media bias phenomenon."[66] They identified three groups – pro-Israel, pro-Arab, and neutral – and measured reactions to the same news coverage of the 1982 Lebanon War. It was as if the "pro-Arab and pro-Israeli subjects 'saw' different news programs … [P]ro-Arab subjects reported that 42% of the references to Israel in the news programs were favorable and that only 26% were unfavorable, whereas pro-Israeli subjects reported that only 16% of the references to Israel were favorable, and that 57% were unfavorable."[67]

And it wasn't only that each side saw mainstream news coverage as biased against its position. Both sides also "believed that this overall sample of news coverage would lead undecided or ambivalent viewers to become more hostile to the side that the partisans personally favored."[68] In other words, partisans expect otherwise "neutral" observers, such as journalists, to adopt their point of view. Strident pro-Israel groups, such as the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA), regularly see the *New York Times* as hostile to Israel.[69] Strident pro-Palestinian groups and writers make the exact opposite claim.[70] Each sees a danger that non-partisans will be swayed to support the other side.[71] Few step back to consider what it would actually take to achieve peace rather than being consumed with what one should believe, say, or do to support their "team."

A genie grants someone three wishes. The person can wish for anything, even more wishes. There's one caveat: whatever he wishes for, his neighbor gets double. The man says, "Poke out one of my eyes."

In 2007, Jeremy Ginges and colleagues published "Sacred Bounds on Rational Resolution of Violent Political Conflict,"[72] based on a study of groups living in the West Bank and Gaza – Israeli settlers, Palestinian refugees, and Palestinian students.

Some Israel supporters have said that if the Palestinians saw peace as providing economic advancement, they'd be happier and more likely to give up their demands. The Ginges study suggests the opposite – that when sacred values are in play, the additional "incentive" of material improvement may "backfire." Who wants to feel they have sold something sacred for something material?

For Jewish Israelis, the right to Israel as a Jewish state is sacred; for Palestinians, the right of return is sacred. What the Ginges study showed is that the antagonists were open to compromise in only one scenario – when they saw their opponent giving up one of their sacred values. In other words, in order for there to be peace, both sides will have to lose.

Obviously, there are important differences between how Palestinians and Israelis living in the Middle East view this conflict, and how their partisan proxies think about it on campus. People in the region have a direct stake in what happens, with implications for how many people (on both sides) will die in the process. It is perhaps easier to stake out an absolutist position from the safety of the American campus. Wrong political decisions won't put you or family or your nation at risk.

The campus battle over Israel and Palestine is fueled by identity, sacred symbols, moral impulses, and an "us vs. them / good-bad" binary. It ought to be used on campus as a picture window into how people think about such charged and difficult issues.

Many people, including students and faculty at most colleges and universities, don't care about the Israel/Palestine conflict. There

are over 4,000 institutions of higher learning in the United States, and Israel is an issue on only a small percentage.[73] But those who advocate zealously for one side or the other are usually not calm, geek-like critical thinkers. They can be juiced up on partisanship, and their thinking largely directed by intuition, emotion, and the distortion of facts to fit their gut feeling.

Young people engaging with political passion is a good thing. They helped support the civil rights movement and end the Vietnam War. The difference is that whatever one believes about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, it is happening thousands of miles away.[74] Yet, it has a powerful sway over those who choose to allow the conflict to become an important part of their identity, their "ingroup."

Colleges and universities may, abstractly, be doing a good job teaching students facts and theories associated with a wide range of academic disciplines. But they usually do not help students step back and think about *how* they think. That's a shame. Because if students were more aware of our innate tendencies, using brains developed over millennia to see ingroups and outgroups, they'd help produce graduates who crave complexity, and who think more clearly. Instead, we're seeing some campuses where students and faculty seem eager to sacrifice the academy as a place dedicated to the production of knowledge, transforming it into a battlefield over the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.