A RESPONSE TO TAMAR MEISELS

Brian Klug

Our third and final article on the the Israel/ Palestine conflict and anti-semitism.

I am grateful to Tamar Meisels for her response to my article and encouraged by her endorsement of the main lines of the argument. Taking it further, Meisels suggests that the 'argumentative tactic' of falsely accusing opponents of being anti-Semitic cannot be 'good for the Jews'. I agree: such unwarranted accusations tend to devalue the word, cheapen the charge and alienate people of goodwill who (rightly) resent being falsely accused of bigotry. Furthermore, such 'argumentative tactics' distract attention from the real political issues which, until they are resolved, will continue to cause misery in the lives of Palestinians and Israelis alike. In other words, they are not good for anyone.

By the same token, a spade should be called a spade. When bigotry enters the picture, whether it is anti-Semitism on the part of those who sympathize with the Palestinian cause, or Islamophobia and anti-Arab sentiment among partisans of Israel, we should name it for what it is. The question is how to distinguish the real thing from the false. That this should be approached as an *analytical* – and not *polemical* – problem is a further point on which Meisels and I are in accord.

Sometimes the anti-Semitic content of a given text (whether a speech, article or graphic) is obvious. Take, for example, the cartoon that appeared on the front page of the Italian national daily *La Stampa* in April 2002 during the siege of the Church of Nativity by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). It depicted a baby Jesus asking, 'Are they going to kill me for a second time?' Milking the connotations of the town (Bethlehem) and the name of the church (Nativity) for all they are worth, the cartoon superimposed

doi:10.1017/S1477175608000225 © 2008 The Royal Institute of Philosophy
Think 20, Vol. 7 (Winter 2008)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175608000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the mythic role of Christ-killer onto a confrontation between the Israeli military and Palestinian fighters.

Sometimes, however, the content is ambiguous. A case in point is the cartoon by Dave Brown that followed an attack by the IDF on Gaza City. It depicted Ariel Sharon (Prime Minister of Israel at the time) apparently in the act of consuming an infant whom he held in his hands (*The Independent*, January 2003). One expert observer saw this as alluding to 'the classic "blood libel" of Jews murdering gentile children for their blood'. Others, no less expert, recognized an allusion to a painting by Goya, *Saturn Devouring One of His Sons*, and noted that Sharon was not depicted with any stereotypical Jewish features and that there were no Jewish symbols in the cartoon. This illustrates why falling back on the 'I know it when I see it' test is problematic: one person might 'know' that a given text is anti-Semitic while another person 'knows' that it is not.

As Meisels says, identifying anti-Semitism is not an exact science. But I am sure that she would agree that this does not mean falling back on some mysterious faculty of intuition. Rather, it is a matter of *judgment*; and judgements can be made – and judged – on rational grounds. Her own examples indicate how, utilising the familiar anti-Semitic figure of 'the hated Jew', we can derive a set of criteria. There might still be room for disagreement in a given case. But criteria of evaluation, based on a valid benchmark, provide parameters. In other words, the point of having clear and accurate criteria is not to achieve *unanimity* but *rationality*.

Meisels concludes with a political remark about how and why 'the existence of a Zionist Jewish state' is important for Jews. Though her remark is somewhat elliptical, I suspect that she and I have a rather different take on the subject. This only underlines how much we agree on the fundamental point at hand: intellectual analysis should not be distorted by ulterior ends. The point is at least as old as Socrates' quarrel with the sophists. It is a distinction – between truth and propaganda – for which my article is intended to make a plea.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175608000225 Published online by Cambridge University Press