



WITHIN YOUR GATES

בשעריך פי אָבֻדִּים

But

Author(s): Gabriel Schwake

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‘Don’t get me wrong, the images from Gaza are heartbreaking, *but...*’, is a very common opening sentence that one hears, usually followed (in an ascending order of indifference) by ‘there is no other way to defeat terror,’ ‘war is messy,’ ‘it is not my problem,’ ‘they started it,’ or the ultimate ‘perhaps it needs to happen, otherwise they will never learn.’ In this arrangement, the three-letter word *but*, obtains a somewhat mystic ability of practically canceling everything said or written before it. Moreover, it is not only that the first part (a) becomes redundant and thus perhaps could be better left out; it even functions as a supporting statement, which, despite contradicting the second part (b), eventually enhances it. It is this seeming complexity that turns *but* into a wicked term, where the validity of Statement B is corroborated despite the limitations imposed by Statement A, and, in turn, even further bolsters the legitimacy of Statement B. There are both conscious and unconscious *buts*, which follow differing rationales and are used to develop varying argumentations, yet are often perceived similarly, and thus, even when used to promote a sense of understanding or a moral deliberation, their use evokes a sense of deterrence and repulsion, leading to the exact opposite response or effect one might have initially hoped for.

The most common, *but* is that of an apparent sympathy, in which one allegedly acknowledges a dilemma yet is still able to escape the perplexing situation after a logical, and somehow utilitarian, contemplation. Nevertheless, while the traditional dilemma is a choice between two "wrongs" that could never be reconciled, here, there is a more worthy and right scenario that outweighs other considerations. Whether serving as mere lip service or resulting from profound deliberations, the simplicity of the ‘yes, but’ formula eventually turns it into a pretense of not losing one’s moral compass. This masquerade of morality is deceptive not only because of its evident hypocrisy but mainly because it is used to grant the speaker the moral high ground, thereby guaranteeing that their conclusions are the outcome of sincere reflection.

Accordingly, the more straightforward "but it's not my problem" is less antagonistic, since sincere indifference, precisely because it is honest, is easier to respect than false sympathy. And if sympathy is unable to evolve, then empathy, its more evolved older sister, the basis of effective communication and moral action, for sure has no place. Alongside the question of empathy rises the issue of agency, with the *but* performing as a conditioning aspect, in which one claims: 'I know that a is the moral option, but I have no other choice than embracing b.' By using it, one thus forsakes one's moral agency, outsourcing it while avoiding confronting the implications of one's decisions.

On the extreme side of the 'yes, but' spectrum, we meet the most frightening version, the reassuring one. In this case, it is not despite the dilemma but rather due to it, and the greater the paradox, the merrier. In this case, succumbing to petty moralism is a sign of weakness, one that overlooks the larger picture and thus is, in itself, immoral. It is not by chance that the sentence 'he who has mercy on the cruel will end up being cruel to the merciful' has been cited so often recently. It invokes precisely this logic, where shortsighted moral torments function as a test of one's ability to overcome them. Therefore, Statement A, the part preceding the *but*, becomes an argument that only highlights the validity and moral urgency of Statement B, the part succeeding the *but*. As such, it functions as a rhetorical trampoline in which the apparent acknowledgment of doubt is immediately flipped into a demonstration of determination, and what seemed like hesitation is reframed as evidence of superior clarity, turning the moral contradiction into a moral consistency. In this case, instead of representing a moral dilemma, the *but* serves as a rhetorical tool to overstate the necessity of firmness.

It is by seeing the more moderate *but* through the extreme one that we are able to grasp what makes it inappropriate and even repulsive. Depending on the context and my dialogue partner, I have occasionally used *but* to present different, and sometimes opposing, arguments, though usually in the hope of promoting a notion of complexity or multidimensionality while advocating for a more inclusive perspective. If in one conversation I found myself asking – 'but what do you expect to happen when you lock people up in an open-air prison for so many years? – in another it transformed into, 'but in this neighborhood we live in, sadly, fear is more appreciated than care or compassion.' What shocked me was not my chameleon-like demagogic ability of presenting a counterargument for the sake of intellectual dialogue, but rather that, even if for only a brief moment, I was justifying the unjustifiable. In those fleeting inversions, the *but* did not expand complexity; it collapsed it, while turning what should have been an opening to critical reflection into an implicit endorsement of violence and hatred, relying on an insidious ability to momentarily suspend moral judgment.

Yet, I would argue that the main issue with using *but* remains in the way it is conceived, not only in the way it is perceived. Earlier in this text, I framed *but* as a bug in the system that promotes false sympathy and hinders sincere empathy, and I have concluded that this is more of a feature in the system, a protective shield used precisely to prevent one from empathizing with what they perceive as unworthy of empathy. The *but* in this case functions similarly to what Karl Popper defined as an 'ad hoc... auxiliary assumptions,' applied to bolster a scientific theory and 'avoid refutation,' and in doing so, maintains its validity, despite contradictory observations or arguments.¹ However, according to Popper, a theory becomes useless when it is rendered irrefutable and thus lacks validity. At the same time when Popper was writing his treatises on the history of human thought, his French contemporary Roland Barthes was looking into *Myths* and how their use 'abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences ... does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible... (and) organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth.'²

While I am sure that both Popper and Barthes wouldn't have been too happy to be quoted in the same paragraph, more than half a century later, I will allow myself to synthesize their arguments by claiming that by creating irrefutable frameworks, we bring forward a world without contradictions, and thus without depth. I will go further and claim that what we are truly trying to avoid here is doubt, as though by seeing the contradictions, we will be tempted to empathize with other perspectives and abandon our ideological base. The lack of depth, according to Barthes, 'establishes a blissful clarity... (in which) things appear to mean something by themselves,' i.e., to present a brutal, human-chosen action as if it were a natural disaster or an unchangeable law of physics, and by that to absolve one from having to make a moral choice.³ Doubt, I would argue, is thus imperative, as it is its antithesis, *confidence*, that eventually leads us into temptation, closing our hearts to the voices of others, indicating that no matter what claims they might bring forward, they will be refuted.⁴ *But* is thus a tool to abolish doubt, and promote false confidence, yet it becomes the primary weapon we use to sanitize reality, functioning as an artificial ceiling on our emotional capacity while guaranteeing that we never have to hold two difficult, competing, valid claims at the exact same

¹ Popper, Karl R. (1962). *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. Routledge Classics. Routledge, p. 48.

² Barthes, Roland, Annette Lavers, and Roland Barthes. 1957. *Mythologies*. 47. [print. Hill and Wang], p. 73.

³ Barthes 1957, 73.

⁴ Fun fact, between the first and second draft of this text, I had the chance to watch the recent Hollywood blockbuster *The Conclave*, in which the protagonist Cardinal Thomas Lawrence (played by Laim Neesen) delivers a captivating speech following a similar argument on the importance of doubt.

time; and, god forbid, even acknowledge the consistent inconsistencies of national ideologies.⁵ *But* reduces the vast, overlapping spectrum of human suffering to a rigid, binary record where empathy has no chance of surviving.

In a world in which sorrow, grief, and suffering are a zero-sum game, in which acknowledging one's agony comes at the expense of acknowledging that of another, empathy challenges a fundamental aspect of ideologies, which is seeing the world without contradictions, and thus should be avoided. As a first step in escaping this line of thinking and embracing a truly inclusive perspective, one should try to replace one's *buts* with *ands*: i.e., it is not that Statement A is accurate, but Statement B is more valid; rather, Statement A is accurate and Statement B is accurate as well, and no matter what, they do not contradict each other. I am heartbroken by the story of Hind Rajab, and I am heartbroken by the story of the Bibas brothers. I hope no one has an urge to add a *but* here.

⁵ Schwake, Gabriel. 2023. "Red Pitched Roofs: A (Post)Colonial Genealogy of Architectural Identity in the Jerusalem Area." *Jerusalem Quarterly* 95: 6–30. See, specifically, p. 11.