



Evasive tactics

AUTHOR:John Higgins¹ **AFFILIATION:**¹Senior Research Scholar, Centre for Higher Education Development, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa**CORRESPONDENCE TO:**

John Higgins

EMAIL:

john.higgins@uct.ac.za

HOW TO CITE:Higgins J. Evasive tactics. *S Afr J Sci.* 2025;121(3/4), Art. #21179. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2025/21179>**ARTICLE INCLUDES:**

- Peer review
- Supplementary material

KEYWORDS:

Gaza, neutrality principle, associative web, deliberation, rhetoric

PUBLISHED:

7 March 2025

**Significance:**

This response to the Commentary entitled ‘Should our universities respond to geopolitical conflicts around the world?’ analyses some of the evasive tactics adopted by Chetty. It demonstrates how these tactics weave an associative web that inhibits the reader from the work of deliberation necessary to forming an opinion. It further argues that (in terms of philosophical grammar) proper deliberation is a necessarily prior step to the holding or maintaining of something as a principle (including, as here, the neutrality principle).

I understand the Commentary¹ as putting forward or drawing upon what is generally referred to in academic freedom debates as the ‘neutrality principle’. This is usually identified with the University of Chicago’s Kalven Committee Report, published in 1967, but, more lately, accorded an authoritative status by university administrators as these responded to pressure from Republican politicians in the USA. I leave aside direct engagement with the history of this principle for now, only noting that the current Commentary seems to repeat much of its internal and contextual complexity.² I intend to provide necessary extension on this matter and will submit a contribution to the *South African Journal of Science* discussing the neutrality principle in practice.

The current response offers a prior step in that necessarily more detailed argument. It seeks to demonstrate a pattern of evasiveness in the Commentary, one which proves to be particularly important in preparing the reader for its eventual conclusion, the adoption of the neutrality principle. The cumulative effect of this text’s evasive tactics is to prepare the reader to support the adoption of a principle without engaging in the due deliberation necessary to actively *choose* whether to adopt something as a principle.

As a teacher of critical and attentive reading, I always say to my students that the beginnings of texts are important. They repay the most careful attention.

Beginnings necessarily work to establish the framework for the argument or analysis to come. Carefully read, they can be seen to *embody* (and not simply anticipate, in the manner recommended by composition manuals) the focus of what is to follow. Any choice of focus sets in place the necessary, but perhaps barely conscious, selection of what an argument is to include, what it is willing to consign to its blurry margins, or what it even prefers to keep entirely out of sight.

The current Commentary is no exception. From the very first clause of its very first sentence, it embodies the evasiveness which governs the argument to follow. (It may be worth noting, though I will not elaborate here, that the first ‘sentence’ is not, strictly speaking, a sentence: it lacks the formally necessary markers of grammatical co-ordination.)

How does this work as a matter of textual practice?

Consider how the Commentary establishes the ground for the argument to follow by first stating that the “Israeli–Palestinian matter” is a “long-standing, controversial political matter”.

Let us begin with the choice of the word “matter” as the noun to refer to the real-world events to which this text is responding. It is worth noting that, somewhat paradoxically, the noun ‘matter’ is the most *abstract* way of referring to something concrete. The whole point of the noun is its capacity to refer abstractly to *any* kind of matter, but always with the proviso that the matter in question will then require further specification if it is to make any particular sense.

What is the particular sense that is offered here by the adjectival specification? The qualifying and restrictive adjectives are “Israeli–Palestinian”: the particular matter in question is the “Israeli–Palestinian matter”.

Many implications are put into play through this formulation; but these implications all work to *obscure* rather than to throw light on the “matter” at hand. To choose to refer to the events in Gaza (the reality which Chetty does his level best to avoid) as the “Israeli–Palestinian matter” is immediately to choose to evade – rather than to try and come to meaningful terms with, as is essential to any practice of deliberation – those events.

Let us detail just a few of these. In the first instance, stating that the “matter” is an “Israeli–Palestinian” one strongly suggests that *no one else should be (or has the right to be)* involved in it. As an *Israeli–Palestinian* matter, the implication is that *only* Israelis and Palestinians are entitled to speak about it, importantly establishing one thread in the associative web that helps to support the central assertion that universities in general *should just keep quiet*.

At the same time, it is worth noting how the formulation creates a false and misleading characterisation of the actors *actually involved* in this “matter”. First, the formulation distorts reality in a politically unhelpful way, suggesting that Palestinians and Israelis (from their respective sides) are *all of one mind* with regard to this “matter”, the “Israeli–Palestinian matter”. This is unhelpful because it is the fact of internal divisions within the two sides that yields a potential opening to the possibility of the dialogue and deliberation which seem necessary (if not sufficient) for reaching any truly sustainable political solution.

The real range of Palestinian opinion is never sounded, nor is there any recognition of the major opposition within Israel itself to the government’s conduct, nor to the divisions in the Jewish community worldwide, both in terms of public statement and alignment, but going all the way down into the most private and bitter disputes within individual families.

Second, it ignores the reality that many other national actors are already engaged, whether as more or less direct political allies or antagonists (such as the USA, Egypt, Iran, and Lebanon) or as international reporting bodies such as the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, Amnesty International and many others. That this initial specification does not really work is confirmed by the attempt at the immediate further clarification of the “matter” as a “long-standing, controversial political matter”.

Does this help?

Unfortunately (in terms of what a real clarification, apt for furthering deliberation, would involve), each of these descriptors is evasive in its own way. “Long-standing” works to bracket off from consideration the specifics of any punctual moment: the now retreats from view as merely an instance of what has *always* been happening; second, and in so doing, it *refuses the possibility of historical (and consequently of political) understanding*. This possibility is further removed by the category of the “controversial”, here invoking the idea of the “matter” as essentially irresolvable, akin to the paper-thin Scholastic controversies now considered meaningless.³

The most crucial adjective here, though, is “political”. As the third and final qualifying adjective, it necessarily contains the accumulating force of what has gone before, as well as working to anticipate the signifying force of much that is to come. What are we to make of the use of “political” in the Commentary?

The adjective “political” is used some seventeen times in the Commentary (the related “geopolitical” five). Suffice it to say that the “political” is always invoked in a negative and often trivialising way, so that cumulatively, it comes to assume the force of what we might call a ‘dirty word’: something that should never be mentioned in polite (or academic) company.

I suggest that this insistent return to the *adjective* “political” can be read as the sign of the word and concept that the essay wishes to keep at bay and keep out of sight. This is the substantive noun, *politics*: never once used in the Commentary, it is always spectrally present as what stands behind or somehow within the adjective political. Politics is there (but not there) as an insistent pressure from a reality that the writing does not wish to acknowledge.

Does not wish to acknowledge but cannot entirely evade.

For politics insists on coming through even as it is being denied and evaded. We can see this perhaps most clearly in a sentence which stands at the very centre (the Derridean in me wants to say the ‘absent centre’) of the Commentary.

Let us read how the pressure of politics comes through, even (or perhaps especially) as it is resisted and denied.

“Yes,” the text acknowledges, as if responding to a querying interlocutor, “this is, of course, a human rights issue [*yes, politics*] and a horrific one [*yes, in the real world*] at that”. But, as everyone knows, an apparently casual “of course” in a formulation only prepares the ground for a firm (and perhaps even scathing) rebuttal of the interlocutor’s views, a turn away from them.

So, despite the admission that the “issue” (another abstracting noun) is “a horrific one” (or would be if you took the trouble to look at it), a “but” immediately introduces a swerve in thinking away from that momentary intrusion of a horrific reality (“but if you take only a little step back”). The rebuttal openly warns the interlocutor to stay away from *any attempt to think historically* (that is, taking a “little step back to ask how this has come about”). This warning seeks to justify itself on the grounds that properly understood (and as we have already been primed, by the web of implication, to accept) the issue is a *timeless* one, one that “has no end even if we go back decades if not centuries”.

At this point, the interlocutor (or this interlocutor at least) might refuse to follow and accept this syntactical swerve. They might insist that politics – understood as the effort at political understanding that historical analysis is needed to inform – is the name of the necessary attempt to find some footing on a slippery slope. In this case, finding a footing means, at the

very minimum, trying to face the reality of events, rather than turning your back on it.

It involves the effort of thinking things through and, as a key component in such an effort, the struggle to find an adequate language to use as the basis for public deliberation. Not that finding such an adequate language is likely to be an easy matter. Specification would involve an account of the events themselves, including the actions of both the Netanyahu government and of Hamas, the informed consideration of questions such as: Are Palestinians in Gaza best understood as citizens or refugees? Is Gaza a state, a proto-state or a ghetto-state, or, as some have suggested, just ‘an open-air prison camp’? Is best considered a war (between opposing armies) or something more akin to counterinsurgency, with all its deliberately barbarous tactics?⁴⁻⁶

These, and many other fundamental questions, are effectively cordoned off by the Commentary when they are, in fact, essential to the thinking that should go into *making a decision* about the question of public statement.

You can now see, I hope, the importance of the web of associative logic that has been briefly traced here. It is important because it primes the reader for an *unconsidered* acceptance of the ‘content’ of the argument: the advocacy of the ‘neutrality principle’.

Indeed, it is worth noting (as a closing point) that such unconsidered acceptance is aided and abetted by the semantic ambivalence present in the very term “principle”.

In the natural sciences, and particularly in Newtonian physics, a principle is a fundamental truth or proposition on which others depend, and so can serve as the *unexamined starting point* of an inquiry.

This is far from the case in moral and political discourse, where a principle is more properly understood as a stance that is (more or less consciously) adopted by an agent as the result of (more or less conscious) deliberation.^{7,8}

In moral and political argument, the correct grammar is always to speak of *adopting* a principle, with the implication that this can only properly be done *after* a process of deliberation has been engaged and concluded. It seems to me that the Commentary works precisely to try and obviate such a necessary process.

Indeed, I read the Commentary (with its associative web carefully woven to support what I have argued is a grammatically mistaken appeal to the ‘neutrality principle’) as seeking, above all, to spare the academic community from what, in another context, the philosopher David Wiggins described as the “agony of thinking and all the torment of feeling that is actually involved in reasoned deliberation”⁹.

I do not think, that in the case of Gaza, such agony and torment can properly be avoided or should be avoided.

It should also be added that adopting the neutrality principle as something like a principle in the scientific, axiomatic sense also incurs the real danger of making anyone who refuses to accept or follow it as an unquestionable principle into what Carl Schmitt referred to as ‘an internal enemy’, to be dealt with accordingly (and as we now see happening in Germany and the USA), and in ways that obviate the very possibility of deliberation from the start.¹⁰

Declarations

My views are my own and do not necessarily represent the views of my institution or member organisations. I have no competing interests to declare. I have no AI or LLM use to declare.

References

1. Chetty N. Should our universities respond to geopolitical conflicts around the world? *S Afr J Sci.* 2025;121(3/4):Art. #19349. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2025/19349>
2. Kalven Committee. Report on the university’s role in political and social action [document on the Internet]. c1967 [cited 2024 Dec 18]. Available from: https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/KalvenRprt_0.pdf



3. Harrison P. Angels on pinheads and needles. *Notes Queries*. 2016;63(1):45–47. <https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjv232>
 4. International Court of Justice. Legal consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem [document on the Internet]. c2024 [cited 2024 Dec 18]. Available from: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n23/004/68/pdf/n2300468.pdf>
 5. Høvring R. Gaza: The world's largest open-air prison [webpage on the Internet]. c2018 [cited 2024 Dec 18]. Available from: <https://www.nrc.no/news/2018/april/gaza-the-worlds-largest-open-air-prison/>
 6. Treistman J. *When bad states win: Rethinking counterinsurgency*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press; 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780228013518>
 7. Williams B. Internal and external reasons. In: Williams B, editor. *Moral luck*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1981. p. 101–113.
 8. Dunn J. *Political obligation in its historical context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1980. p. 244–250.
 9. Wiggins D. Deliberation and practical reason. *Proc Aristot Soc*. 1975/1976;76:29–51. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aristotelian/76.1.29>
 10. Schmitt C. *The concept of the political*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; 1996. p. 27
-