

Opinion Why we split the world into good and evil — and make decisions we regret



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Humans carve the world cleanly in two when they feel threatened. There's a right and a wrong, a good and an evil, an us and a them. In normal times, this behavior is most obvious in people with serious depression or borderline personality disorder. [Psychologists call it "splitting."](#)

These days, we see a lot of splitting by all kinds of people, from students to senators. "This fight is barbarism against civilization, good versus evil," [Sen. Ted Cruz \(R-Tex.\) said](#) after the Oct. 7 attacks on Israel. "The differences between the two sides are as stark as darkness and light."

In times of high anxiety, each new conflict gets framed this way, a galactic struggle against a dark lord. Complexity is intolerable; ambivalence is cowardly. During the racial justice protests in 2020, *all* cops were bastards — or so the slogan went. You were either a racist or an anti-racist. "There is no inbetween safe space of 'not racist,'" Ibram X. Kendi wrote.

Splitting is deeply comforting, down in your gut. It promises an escape hatch from chaos. If we read the right books and put up the right lawn signs, it whispers, "We can be safe here, on the side of good, far from *them*."



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But like most cognitive distortions, splitting makes us feel worse after it makes us feel better. Bright lines have a way of hardening into prison bars. "When besieged, we tend to raise our mental drawbridges and shut out new information just when it is needed most," Maggie Jackson writes in her new book, "Uncertain: The Wisdom and Wonder of Being Unsure." "The catch-22 is clear. We yearn for clarity when we know least about our predicament."

We also start to misidentify our enemies — and our heroes. We can't integrate information that doesn't fit the narrative. Every day, our blind spots grow. When splitting, people "get stuck in either the thesis or the antithesis," pioneering psychologist [Marsha M. Linehan wrote](#), "unable to move toward synthesis."

As President George W. Bush led the country into two catastrophic wars, he split the world into two oversimplified camps: the United States and evil. He referred to "evil" in 319 speeches, or [nearly a third](#) of all his speeches in his first 2½ years in office, according to Peter Singer's book "The President of Good and Evil." That kind of clarity felt reassuring to millions of Americans, but it left no room for doubt — or for reality. Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein could be brutal and deceptive *and* pose no clear threat to the security of the United States. Many things can be true at once. People usually don't fit into convenient categories, try as we might to sort them that way.

For example, [about 20 percent](#) of Israel's citizens are Arab. Where do those 2 million people fit in a split universe? Last month, 70 percent of these Arab citizens said they [felt part of Israel](#) — up from just 48 percent in June. Meanwhile, among Jewish Israelis, less than 4 percent said they trust Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as the most reliable source of information on the war against Hamas, [according to another poll](#). How do we make sense of this? Splitting is a broken compass in a byzantine world.

Most of us feel unsure and conflicted about how to solve hard problems, from war in the Middle East to racism in America. When politicians and activists split us apart, and hear only from extremists, they lose touch with that reality. For years before *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, it was clear many Republicans did not fit neatly into the antiabortion camp. About a third said they supported legal abortion if a woman wanted one for any reason, according to the 2021 General Social Survey. And yet, when voters in states including Kansas and Ohio protected abortion rights, it somehow came as a surprise to many political experts.

Likewise, when it comes to climate change, there are not two groups — deniers and believers — and there never were. Since 2008, researchers Anthony Leiserowitz and Edward Maibach have been tracking American public opinion on the subject, and they have identified no fewer than six groups — from the Alarmed to the Disengaged to the Dismissive — which have shifted in size over the years. (Want to find out which group you're in? Take the Six Americas Quiz here! I am “Concerned.”)

The lesson here is to always assume that humans reside along a spectrum of behavior — if they fit anywhere at all. Journalists, in particular, must help us see this — by interviewing people who have changed their minds or who are unsure and don't fit neatly into one camp. Amplify their voices; they are a lot like most of us.

One of the most helpful things I've read since the war in Gaza began was Lulu Garcia-Navarro's interview with Israeli writer Etgar Keret for the New York Times. In the days after Hamas's attacks, he felt the urge to split — and he was actively fighting it, working to see the fuller catastrophe, so to speak: “I think that in our souls, or our minds, or whatever you call it, there is something very complex, some ability to contain ambiguity, not to be swept with only one emotion. To be able to inhale the complexity of existing,” he said.

To Americans more than 5,000 miles away, feuding over whether this public school system or that college leader was sufficiently outraged, he had this to say: “That's crazy. This idea of people saying: Condemn this, condemn that. I don't want anybody to condemn anything. I say, be human. You see somebody in pain, try to see that pain.”

That may be the best advice for living in a time like this: “Inhale the complexity.” See the pain. Beware black-and-white thinking — and rest your tired eyes on the gray. That's where all the action is.