

WHAT ROLE FOR PHILOSOPHY

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Mohammad Bu Azizeh's matchstick seems to have set fire not just to himself, but to large parts of the Arab world as well. Perhaps Arab thinkers and social scientists should not be faulted for not having forecasted this sudden peoples' eruption any more than Western economists and theorists could be faulted for not having foreseen the major financial crisis that swept the western (and much of the rest of the) world, and which was set off in New York a couple of years ago. Concerning the latter, Lebanese expert Nassim Taleb invokes the example of a black swan –the inevitable, but unforeseeable swerve or interruption of the ordinary run of things in life. When it happens, you know it was, after all, inevitable. But there was no way you could have foreseen it.¹

Alternatively, Arab thinkers and intellectuals should perhaps be excused for not seeming to have discovered the ailment of the Arab World or its cure, and for therefore spending a century, as Fuad Zakariyya sadly observed, going round in full circle searching for it. Perhaps, after all, there is no such thing as 'the Arab

¹ Nassim N. Taleb *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (Random House) 2007. The example is often used in introductory philosophy to point out the limitation of inductive reasoning (that the risk always exists for generalizations in the form of laws to be disproven by a new observation).

World' that could be an object of study or a single unit of analysis to begin with; or nothing that is solid enough for the kind of diagnostic approach intellectuals assumed was the appropriate tool to use for understanding it. Albert Hourani's classical study² of the genesis of contemporary Arab thought as a generic activity awakened by physical contact with the West and its values was followed by more studies, as we also saw last time, in all showing how these thinkers and intellectuals have indeed shaped the thought patterns of the Arab World. But thought and reality on the whole remained in separate worlds, or if they did combine or merge (such as in tentative acts of union between States or Parties) the result was very quickly proved to be the wrong medical mixture. Absal and Salaman, in other words, may truly be irreconcilable or organically incompatible. The Salamans of the Arab World, as we are witnessing these days, probably carry much of the blame for their incapacity to heed the advice of reason and compassion the Absals of this world may try to give them.

Or, again, maybe the fault lies with Absal's identity, this reflecting what philosophy's, and the philosopher's roles are, as an activity and as an actor who are apart from the normal lives of men. The calling of Plato's philosopher, we can remind ourselves, lay in his having to return to the cave in order to help guide his people. In a sense, while acknowledging that his true world, as

² Albert Hourani *Arabic thought In the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Oxford:OUP) 1962.

well as his self-fulfillment as a philosopher, placed him ‘outside’ the cave (for it is there that true knowledge is acquired), his nature best placed him inside. His is perhaps the best paradigm of what being an outsider on the inside –a janus- means. But this is no Zola or Spinoza –Benda’s heroes. This is more like, perhaps, a Vaclav Havel. It is not also, to use another image, Alfarabi’s philosopher-king, whose self-fulfillment (and not just nature) as a philosopher lay precisely in being king. As a side-note one should perhaps add here that Alfarabi may in fact be a better model than Averroes for al-Jabiri and others who wish to reclaim old rationalist masters from the Islamic world, and place their calling at the heart of Arab political reality. Not only was Alfarabi a rationalist in the general sense; he wished for rationalism to sit at the helm of society, to be sovereign. One wonders, of course, whether, sitting at the helm, a philosopher can remain being a philosopher, or whether he does not by default transform into becoming a politician, a Salaman. But I suspect that Alfarabi’s response might well be to ask whether this observation does not in any case beg the question about what he proposes being a philosopher is.

Or, again, the philosopher’s role and true calling may not lie in sitting at the helm of society at all. Indeed, philosophy’s role and relevance may be said to lie somewhere else altogether –neither in diagnosing societies and their ailments nor in discovering cures or forecasting eruptions. Rather –and this reflects now my

own belief- its role and relevance may lie in education, or in its Socratic nature, where its best use can be that of producing inquisitive minds rather than grand theories. A heuristic role such as this immediately compels us to rethink what kind of philosophy that is which is to perform this Socratic function. It cannot simply be a classical course or collection of such courses in schools or universities on theories or dogmas, nor can it be an “information-imparting” account of such theories and dogmas held by men of learning throughout the ages. Indeed, it cannot be a special *subject*, alongside other subjects students study. That could be included, of course, alongside the normal fields students are offered in the Sciences and Arts. Rather, it has to be a skill, one that can allow each and every person to sharpen their ability to think for themselves, never to stop inquiring, to become adept at creatively resolving challenges they are bound to meet in their own lives, besides also encouraging them to listen to one another and to respect each other’s views. Like this, philosophy can best be seen as an *approach* rather than as *subject-matter* or *content*. As an approach, it can permeate education, and not be a subject apart. Students studying Physics for example as well as those studying History can be doing it using this, rather than a dry ‘information-imparting’ approach. This model in a sense replaces the ‘philosopher-king for all’ model by another one making a philosopher-king of each, making reason be sovereign in everyone. In this latter case, each one of us in a sense becomes a Janus, an inside outsider, at once detached

from and engaged in what we do, looking without and looking within, constant judges of our thoughts and acts, actors in the real world and quotidian moral beacons at the same time. No reason here for moral guardians or Benda's clerks. No preset answers here: Only people who know how to formulate the right questions. This would be a world in which Benda's laymen have matured enough to be able to look after themselves. It would also be a *democratic* world, or one in which matters of common concern are widely deliberated, and are decided upon through such a process rather than by *fiat* or orders from above. I would claim that what the Arab world is in need of is this kind of philosophy, rather than the one by which it is hoped that grand theories about freedom or capitalism can be constructed and unique cures can be found. I would further claim that, of all Arab intellectuals, Palestinians –by virtue of their circumstance- have been closest to performing this matured laymen's role, and in so doing, have been far more engaged in the determination of their national ailments and cures than their Arab counterparts have been.

To understand how this is so one needs to realize that – returning to Benda's assumption that there is a core moral voice, or a universal moral conscience which genuine 'clerks' should be guardians of- there hasn't perhaps been a sharper test or challenge to this hypothesis in the Arab World than the question –of practical rather than of academic significance- of

whether Israel's existence is a right or a violation thereof. Surely, if there are single truths in the moral or political universe, this would be a perfect example. This extremely critical question, whose implications clearly have tangible impact on peoples' lives, has dominated and continues to exercise Palestinian minds. How Palestinians have had to relate to it on a day by day, and an event by event basis both helped crystallize the ailment they suffer from in a certain way, as well as led to the trial formulations of different cures for it. Because, if there has been any question in any of the Arab intellectuals' minds about what it is the Arab World suffers from and has to rid itself of -its rulers, western values, capitalism, atavism, fanaticism, etc.- the case is totally different for the Palestinians, for whom the source of all their ailments is condensed in simple form and perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be Israel. This is a disorder you can put your hands on. Needless to say, how Israelis also view this question -how they view themselves- also directly affects how they view a possible resolution to their conflict with the Palestinians.

A word here, first, about Palestinian intellectuals: Paradoxically, due perhaps to dispersion, statelessness, dispossession and disruption of means of livelihood, and the closing chapter of defeat by the Arab world in 1967, which placed what was left of Palestine under Israeli rule, Palestinian intellectuals have been far more effective in the determination of their destiny, to the extent this was objectively possible, especially since

1967, than their Arab colleagues ever were in theirs. Some of these were engaged intellectuals, clerk-laymen, sharing the cave (literally) with their colleagues. And some were less connected to the ground, being either fully immersed scholars or exiles in faraway lands, and some were both of these together. And while Diaspora intellectuals had a bigger role to play in the determination of national policies before the mid-eighties, this weight moved to the occupied Territories during the eighties, finding full expression in the first *intifada*, and afterwards. By ‘intellectual engagement’ here I mean engagement by the intellectual *community*, and not just by single intellectuals, for of the latter, there have always been quite a few impressive figures. It is important to say here, especially in view of the negative image the PLO has come to acquire in the new USAID-financed PA era, that it is doubtful if there was any national policy of significance that was not in one degree or another influenced by the input of Palestine’s intellectuals, through what one might describe as an ongoing and open ‘public discourse’, often taking place as an extended debating forum in the press and in party magazines and publications of one or another of the various councils and assemblies of the PLO or of its various factions as and when these met. Some of these engaged intellectuals -doctors, writers, poets- fell along the way, while some others, like once PFLP ideologue and editor Bassam Abu Sharif, came out maimed from an explosive envelop, sent by the Mossad with love. This deep and committed engagement continued, and

may even have been even more proximate or tangible during the first *intifada*, when hundreds of academics and scholars were incarcerated by Israel for various periods for being involved one way or another in that uprising. Their involvement meant, among other things, their ability to formulate the national terms of reference, including the agenda for a declaration of independence, the adoption of until-then tabooed UNSC resolutions such as 242, and widening the scope of dialogue with Jews as to become prelude for negotiations. I believe this input by intellectuals is unparalleled in the entire Arab world. But this Palestinian intellectual climate was an intense one in which there was constant battle between exclusivist political positions and theories each of which bore its own moral flag, for which the skillful Arafat always managed to find a common ground.³

But was there, is there, a right answer, and, even more relevantly, an overarching moral voice, an overarching guardian, of but above the rest, in possession of it? Or is the right answer ‘constructed’, chiseled, so to speak, through informed and responsible public discourse? Various studies have been done on the contribution of intellectuals to the formation of PLO and national policies, but one brief study I wish to invoke here, for reasons I hope will immediately become obvious, is that of Palestinian and Israeli intellectuals since Oslo, done

³ The literature on Palestinian intellectual discourse is very rich, and is found in various publications, journals, political documents, etc. A primary documentation of how this has evolved can be found in Faisal Hourani *Al-Fikr al-Siyasi al-Falastini 1964-1974* (Jerusalem: Abu Arafah) 1980.

by Bruce Maddy-Weitzman.⁴ In this work the author suggests that both American political philosopher Michael Walzer and Edward Said may have close views on Benda's assumption of the genuine clerk paradigm, essentially rejecting it as unrealistic and proposing in its place a kind of half-way clerk, what Walzer calls 'a connected critic', and Said describes as someone whose primordial passions (for his country, religion, etc.) always exert a pull effect on him, constantly beckoning him, so to speak, back to his roots. However, the similarity here I think is deceptive in that, while both Walzer and Said may indeed concur in casting doubt on Benda's paradigm intellectual, what this doubt means for each of them is different. Walzer, dismissing the ideal clerk, proposes in his place what he calls the 'connected' critic. Walzer's 'connected critic' is a modest intellectual, necessarily a janus so his voice can be taken seriously by his community, but certainly not an Olympian god. Said, on the other hand, while recognizing human passion as the Achilles heel of the clerk, does not thereby pronounce him 'nonexistent'. This implies that Said, unlike Walzer whose approach is more like that of the critical theorist, must believe there are absolute values which it is the duty of the genuine intellectual to express (for example, not applying double-standards in making moral judgments). Therefore, even accounting for the presence of this

⁴ B.M-Weitzman *Palestinian And Israeli Intellectuals In The Shadow of Oslo And Intifadat al-Aqsa* (Tel Aviv: Tami Steimetz Center for Peace Research) 2002. This work also cites various works by Palestinian 'intelligentsia' on Palestinian 'intelligentsia'.

‘Achilles heel’ of the passions constantly beckoning, and in spite of his comment that speaking truth to power is no Panglossian idealism,⁵ Said’s model intellectual is nonetheless someone who constantly aspires to reach the truth, and who will fearlessly express it when he finds it, whether to his community or further afield. And indeed, Said’s self-assumed role in Palestinian political life- his position on negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians- has typically expressed itself exactly as that of the ‘guardian of moral conscience’. This has been his self-perceived role as ‘speaking truth to power’.

As we saw last week Lebanese philosopher Ali Harb takes Noam Chomsky and Pierre Bourdieu to task for performing the role they assume for themselves of being prophets of truth and morality. One reason he has for criticizing them is their false assumption, in his view, of there being a transcendental truth or moral standpoint or standard model to begin with for such figures to be guardians of. A correlated reason, Harb argues, is the wrong impression they therefore give to the dispossessed that perfect solutions for their predicaments exist. Solutions have to be constructed bottom-up, so to speak, taking account of different contexts or specific circumstances. In fact, Harb’s critique of Chomsky and Bourdieu is less to do with their intentions than with their assumptions. In

⁵ Said, *op.cit.* p.102. Defining what ‘speaking truth to power’ is he continues that “it is carefully weighing the alternatives, picking the right one...etc.”

particular, he takes issue with Chomsky's theory of preset principles and values, which he views as being almost Platonist in structure, and contrasts this with the pragmatist school of thought of another American philosopher, Richard Rorty. For the latter, both values and items of knowledge are social *acts*, produced in context. They do not belong to a world set apart from the world of human agents, which human agents then seek to discover. Although Harb chooses not to include Said alongside Chomsky and Bourdieu, the question remains whether Said –given what we already said- also falls within the same category, and is therefore subject to the same kind of criticism. Specifically, how would he have responded to the question whether there is an absolute truth in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and therefore a perfectly just solution? Or to the question: Is the very existence of Israel a right, or a violation thereof? I suspect most of us would agree he believed in what we shall call the “single-truth” theory, and was strongly critical of the PLO leadership's policies on that account, saying that Oslo was a foreseen failure because of its not having been grounded in justice.

Here I wish to invoke two seemingly totally unrelated matters, the so-called ‘Palestine Papers’ case which was jumped on everyone by al-Jazeera TV last week, claiming to reveal horrible truths in negotiations that had been hidden from the Palestinian public till now; and, secondly- going again back in time- Averroes's so-called ‘double-truth theory’. Let me begin with the

double-truth theory. Talking about revealed truths and those which are rationally acquired Averroes held, as some of us may know, that these two are not contradictory as they sometimes may seem, but complimentary, the rational side in effect corroborating the revealed. Many interpreters of Averroes have projected this theory as proof of his belief in the harmony between religion and philosophy. I have my doubts about this claim. In his *Decisive Treatise* he specifically argues in the relevant passage that religious truths, whenever they seem to conflict with rational ones, have to be adjusted –that is, to be reinterpreted- by recourse to the latter. This to my mind clearly gives reason primacy over revelation. I call this favoritism rather than harmony. A not dissimilar view, by the way, seems also to have been expressed by the acknowledged spiritual father of contemporary Arab thought, Jamal Eddin al-Afghani –though this was clearly a view that was debunked by his student Mohammad Abdo, in favor of the completely opposite viewpoint, still operational in the drafting of basic laws and constitutions in most of the Arab world, including the PA, of placing revealed law as the source of a constitution that seeks to address the requirements of modernity.

But what is the relevance of Averroes’s ‘double-truth’ theory to the ‘Palestine Papers’ case, and to Edward Said, Chomsky and Bourdieu? There are two examples I wish to invoke here. The first has to do with contradictory beliefs held by most Palestinians and most

Israelis concerning the right of Israel to exist –not only the question of whether Israel’s birth was a case of an immaculate conception or that of having been born in sin; but whether, also its continued dispossession of Palestinian rights, foremost the right of Palestinians and their descendants to return to their original homes and to be compensated, is justified or criminal.

The point I wish to raise here is the following: do we here have two truths or just one? And what would Amos Oz, let us say, on one side, and Chomsky or Said on the other, say? I am not here just referring to the case of occupation by Israel of territories won in the war of '67. I am referring to the entire Zionist package, so to speak. Benda, presumably, would have said there is just one answer to this question. But so also would many Palestinian and Israeli intellectuals say, without of course agreeing on which answer it is. Amos Oz, on the other hand, might say there are two true answers, even though they are or may be incompatible. He might add their incompatibility, though logically significant, is or should be made to be politically irrelevant. Indeed, he might argue, expanding on the Averroistic theme, that there are truths of the future, and truths of the past, and they will be harmonious so long as truths of the future are given primacy over truths of the past. Harmony becomes achievable, in this case, by some sort of transcendental dialectic. Walzer might agree. But I think both Said and Chomsky would take offense, and would insist on calling a spade a spade, and on making the

future's terrain, therefore, be defined by that spade. It is this, I believe, that might explain Said's displeasure with the Oslo peace process, which he saw as a straightforward Versailles-type of total surrender.

Here I wish to return to the contribution I referred to by Palestinian intellectuals. Of course, many Palestinian intellectuals, like Said, held and still hold on to the single-truth theory. But what I also tried to show is that their 'input' in the general intellectual debate among Palestinians ended up constituting but one of many other hues, and that it was eventually in that respect, or as but one of various colliding views, that national policies as *cures* to the Palestinian problem began to be defined, whether, at first, through imagining a total reclamation of Palestine; or, later, one secular State for Jews and Arabs; or, later still, through the idea of partition. And who can tell what will come next? A similar process, needless to say, also unfolded at the level of deliberations concerning the best strategies to be adopted: armed struggle, non-violence, with or without negotiations, and so on. In sum, recalling the image I associated with Amos Oz earlier, and taking Reason as a transcendental approach to otherwise conflicting truths⁶, I would submit that the Palestinian intellectual community has managed over time, and by a constant engagement with political reality, to a large extent to

⁶ I am grateful to my son, Jamal, who many years ago pointed this transcendental method as the only one to address an exclusive formulation of the law of excluded middle, where, that is, two contradictory truths or points of view seem to constitute a *cul-de-sac*, without hope for a resolution.

inform national policy. This they did not do as onlookers but as a community that is engaged on a day-to-day basis in the larger political map. Of course, placing future concerns above past pains and burdens can also be described as capitulation or treason. But such appellations could perhaps now be better understood in the context of the puritanical world of single truths where they belong –on Absal’s island, metaphorically speaking, rather than in the real world of Salaman.

The second example I wish to invoke in this context is, as I said, that of the so-called ‘Palestine Papers’. Here, it may be argued, we have another example of a double-truth situation, a private (negotiators’) truth and a public (disseminated) truth: What finally became revealed wasn’t quite what leaders and negotiators had been saying to their public. However, this is not strictly a ‘double-truth’ example, but a straightforward example of no truth at all, or of lying. This is so in the sense that it could be argued there was only one single truth all along, namely, the actual proceedings of the talks (complete rather than selective as al-Jazeera presented them), and political leaders simply wished not to reveal them, or they wished to make statements for public consumption that did not truly reflect them. Their reasons of course may have been above reproach, in that it may have been thought politically prudent not to reveal to the public what concessions they were ready to

make before they were assured of what gains in compensation they would be able to achieve in return.

So why, if this is not a case of two conflicting truths, have I included it in this context?

Here I come back to Said's "speaking truth to power", but from a different angle. The leaders' intentions in hiding the truth from their public may of course be above reproach. But in addition to the leaders being perhaps simply wrong even if above reproach, the reason for their withholding of the truth may be for the altogether different and definitely inexcusable matter of being afraid for their positions or popularity. Indeed, it is perhaps precisely here that insisting there is but *one truth*, and then proceeding to unmask it really matters. Perhaps I can explain this by making use here of the distinction between factual and evaluative truths so-called. Some would deny such a distinction exists. But assuming there it does, then one could claim that while the question whether Israel's existence is a sin or a right may be evaluative, the other question of whether it exists or not is straightforwardly factual. One could add that while we might come up with contradictory evaluations (and most of our moral and political judgments may be of this nature), whether something is a fact cannot admit of contradictories –it either is a fact or it is not. Or the same distinction could be approached differently: one could propose that while moral truths are ones whose nature is such that they could only be

settled through (political) negotiation –often, as I remarked earlier, only transcendently- the nature of factual truths is such that their settlement has to come about through interactive observation (people come to agree amongst themselves what it is they can regard as facts in their orbits of movement, the micro-level for physicists clearly being different from the macro-level of spouses or settlers, for instance). Either way, that is, whether we take the distinction between factual and evaluative to be objective or subjective, the difference still allows us to single out what are considered factual truths as ones over which there can be ready agreement, especially as we begin to transcend culture-specific contexts. Translating all of this into English what I am saying here is that if the negotiators have agreed to drop the demand for the wholesale return of Palestinian refugees to their original homes, then it is a fact they have done that, and though they may not reveal it, they cannot deny having made the offer, even conditionally.

And now if we ask ourselves what is the nature of that truth which must be said to power –is it the evaluative kind or the factual kind- it becomes immediately obvious that *if* the motivation of Palestinian leaders for hiding the truth from the people was fear for their prestige or public positions, rather than for matters of State, then this surely would constitute a clear case for the intervention of the committed intellectual to sto in and speak out, the truth here being single, and the real power here being the people. This is, of course,

assuming that the concessions to be made in the negotiations are in the interest of the people, and that the intellectual concerned believes this. I say ‘the people’ because a leadership that is in any case afraid of the people is not worth being afraid of, and it is abundantly clear in such a case that real power rests with the people, and it is therefore the people that should be told.

This is of course a long cry from Said’s paradigm of ‘speaking truth to power’, where the setting is typically that of an unjust ruler holding down his subjects by fear, or of a deceptive Government setting the agenda of both national policy and public opinion on behalf of a sinister network of media, the armament industry and major financial institutions, and where the enlightened and independent intellectual fearlessly stands up to unmask the truth, impervious to the consequences to himself. Here indeed, the revealed truth is of a factual nature, but it is contextualized in moral terms, as for example when it is brought to the attention of the public at large that how the U.S. behaves in one area of the world is not consistent morally with how it behaves in another, even though the arguments it uses for its intervention are avowedly to do with the same moral principles, such as the protection of freedom, or human rights, or suchlike.

But while this setting seems to be a perfect fit for a Benda-type intellectual –by which I mean anyone, from Socrates through Spinoza to Said, with allowances being made for the different levels of involvement in their

own societies or in those of others’ - it is a different story when the Palestinian case is approached, especially by a Palestinian intellectual. Here it is the people that have to be confronted with the realities, and that must be spoken to. And here, in my view, Palestinian leaders as well as committed intellectuals should have confronted their public with the truth, or the truths, a long time ago. And here, I believe, Harb’s analysis applies, that the people are not in need of moralizing by self-appointed guardians who claim they have better access to the world of morality than they have; and they do not need to be told how miserable and deprived of rights the lives they are living are; and they certainly want to be respected rather than be lied to or deceived or led down the garden path. Above all they need to be helped to step into a future that is better than the present they are living. And this, I believe, is where the intellectual community could be of help, and where, if it takes the safer path instead to personal glory through telling the public only what they want to hear it would be forsaking its true calling.

I conclude, then, by saying that philosophy’s relevance to the Arab world, especially seeing this world’s pitiful disarray, is beyond doubt, as is the sovereignty of Reason. But the philosophy meant must be the kind that helps develop inquisitive minds -a philosopher-king of each rather than a philosopher-king for all- rather than the kind that proclaims to produce general theories. Palestinian politics has by and large, because of its very

particularized challenge, been a lively theatre for the breeding, colliding and interacting of such minds, though, as we move ahead, and as we shall consider next two lectures, much more head-banging is still needed. As for Benda's clerks, clearly the more connected they are then the more value they can offer. Socrates himself, though sentenced by vote to death, and though despised by many, still had close to forty percent of the Assembly vote behind him. And was even proposed after being sentenced to escape by his prison-guards. Clearly, he was an outsider, but one very much on the inside. A true janus.