

# Prisoners' Day Lecture: Rebellion and Consciousness

by Sari Nusseibeh

• "We only become what we are by the radical and deepseated refusal of that which others have made of us" (Jean Paul Sartre, Preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*).

The consciousness of the need for rebellion is the logical precondition for the rebellion of consciousness. This consciousness is a distinctively human attribute. Other living creatures may have consciousness of sorts. But the consciousness of the need for the rebellion against what is, and the consciousness, therefore, and simultaneously, of what ought to be — this seems to be a distinctively human attribute, and to be fundamentally rooted in a moral sense.

The consciousness of the need for rebellion, implying, as it does, that such a need exists, describes Man as a moral agent of change. Man's classical definition as Rational Animal (not as moral animal) describes Man, one might say, at a more primitive level of human development. The definition had its roots in nature and history, not in theory or in semantics merely. The two concepts of rationality and animalhood were, in classical Greek eyes, strongly connected with another pair of concepts, law, or *nomos*, and nature, or *physis*. This synthesis, Man, combined two conflicting forces, two opposed tendencies, a natural tendency for material and psychological fulfillment, and a rational tendency for containment. We see this conflict between thesis and antithesis laid out before us wherever we look in classical Greek literature. We see it in the historian Thucydides as he perceptively describes aspects of the civil conflict that broke out in Corcyra in 472 AD. "Then, with the ordinary conventions of civilized life thrown into confusion," he writes, "human nature, always ready to offend even where laws exist, showed itself proudly in its true colors, as something incapable of controlling passion, insubordinate to the idea of justice, the enemy to anything superior to itself."

Here then, we witness a war taking place between nature, passion and the so-called superior force of reason, or law as an expression of reason. And as with Thucydides, so with Plato: Man is once again portrayed as a synthesis, ideally an expression of the domination of reason over passion, and the material requirements of Man's animal nature.

The domination of reason as a distinctively human characteristic, and as an affirmation of human identity, or what Man is, becomes less of a fundamental requirement when and where intellectual output comes to reflect, not a master mentality, but the mentality of society in transition, and in distress. We see the change manifest itself in contexts of social upheaval. We see it manifest itself in religious contexts. Reason comes to acquire a moral nature, it comes to be tempered by a loftier element of divinity. In religious contexts, divine law as opposed to natural law reigns supreme. The moral imperative can be an ideal — freedom, equality, independence. We see these values assume a fundamental role in the philosophers of social change. We see these values translated into declaration of human rights, into declarations of independence.

According to the new portrait, Man comes to be defined as a Moral Animal. To be Moral Animal and not Rational

be. To possess this new consciousness is to possess a moral sense, a moral directive. It is to be a moral agent. Reason, according to the new picture, yields its role as sovereign to the moral will. Reason becomes a tool, a mechanism, by which to fulfill the moral will.

To recapitulate: the consciousness of the need for rebellion is a moral consciousness, an evaluative consciousness, a consciousness that what ought to be is the antithesis of what is. This consciousness of the need for rebellion is the logical precondition for the next major step along the path of moral, and human fulfillment: the step of the actual rebellion of consciousness. This rebellion of consciousness is directed by the moral will. In terms of the general human condition, it is the affirmation of being human. In terms of the national condition, it is the affirmation of being a nation. Even in terms of the individual, it is the affirmation of being a person. Respectively, it is the affirmation of human identity, of national identity and character, and of personal identity and character.

The rebellion of consciousness comes in various colors and forms. It may be the rebellion against a constricting personal condition or predicament or against a constricting human condition or predicament. And it may be against national oppression. The battlefield, the bone of contention, may vary. It may be a cigarette offered by the interrogator to the prisoner. It is a roadblock. It is a regulation passed by the occupying power. It is a Military Order 854. It is an anti-PLO pledge. It is spitting inside the prisoner's throat. It is derobing the prisoner, making him stand naked in front of the uniformed interrogator. It is tying a sack saturated with urine around the head of a freedom-fighter. The battle, always, is a battle of wills. It is a battle which aims at robbing the freedom-fighter of his dignity, of his personal identity, of his moral will. It aims at robbing the people of its collective, national will. If you accept the cigarette, you become a non-person, a non-entity. You cease to be human. If you accept 854, if you accept being or feeling humiliated, if your will weakens, and you submit, then your enemy will have attained his objective. He will have dehumanized you. Having made your will submit to his, he will domesticate you, turning you into a pet, a household pet. He will give you the autonomy that he gives to his other domesticated animals, in his own household.

The rebellion of consciousness rejects its antithesis. It rebels against the will of the other. In the course of its rebellion it carves out its own personal identity, its unique character, its own personality. In rebelling against its antithesis, it acquires subjective freedom. Inside jail, the prisoner becomes more free than his interrogator and his torturer. The tool of terror, or humiliation, the interrogator uses shrinks, as if by magic, from being a terrifying monstrosity into real self — a stick of wood, a sack, an ugly but useless tool of oppression. Beating transforms into hard work for the oppressor. MO 854 transforms from being a tool restricting academic freedom into a noose around the moral neck of its designer. Roadblocks transform into hard labor for the occupation soldiers. Town curfews transform into events of national solidarity. And, as the prisoner becomes master of himself, as he becomes free, as his consciousness is in a state of rebellion, the next step becomes prepared. The subjective struggle of

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According to the new portrait, Man comes to be defined as a Moral Animal. To be Moral Animal, and not Rational merely, and coldly, is not simply to possess rationality, or consciousness *per se*. It is more fundamentally to possess Moral Reason. It is to possess the consciousness of the need for rebellion, the need for changing what is into what ought to

possess a moral sense, a moral directive. It is to be a moral agent. Reason, according to the new picture, yields its role as sovereign to the moral will. Reason becomes a tool, a mechanism, by which to fulfill the moral will.

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group identity. In prison, we witness the growth and development of the imprisoned movement. Outside jail, we witness the birth and development of other group movements; the student movement, the union movement. In sum, the national movement. It is a movement of freedom, a freedom movement: seeking to translate subjective freedom into an objective reality, it seeks to attain national fulfillment, national independence.

Man, then, is moral animal. You fulfill yourself as a human being, not by making reason dictate your acts, but by becoming a moral agent, subjecting reason to your moral will. You are a human being insofar as you reject oppression and rebel against it. You are a Palestinian insofar as, and to the extent that you are a rebel, a revolutionary. Hence, the free Palestinian prisoner comes to be a

Palestinian model, as well as a human model.

More generally, the Palestinian revolution is an expression of human affirmation. It is a revolution that seeks freedom for the nation, so that the nation may exercise its sovereignty over itself, and become master of its destiny, thereby transmitting its inner and subjective condition of freedom and independence into an objective condition of statehood and sovereignty.

Under these lights, your value and identity as a person, as a human being, and as a Palestinian, is affirmed through rebellion and resistance. As a free prisoner inside Israeli jails, as a free Palestinian under occupation, you carve out, through pain and suffering, the path, not only of Palestinian, but also of human history.

*Sari Nusseibeh is a professor of philosophy at Bir Zeit University. This paper was presented at a symposium entitled "Resistance, Political Expression and the Status of Political Expression" on Prisoners' Day, April 17.* ■