

*The Koningsburger Lecture at the University of Utrecht*

*GIVING VOICE TO CONSCIENCE*

What is the connection, one might ask, between having conscience and giving expression to it? Any basic dictionary will tell us that conscience is an *inner voice* guiding us to the rightness or wrongness of our actions. Two questions immediately spring to mind. The first is: How should we understand what hearing, and reacting to this voice consists in? The second is: How can we tell that what this voice says (even to us, but also to others) is true- that it truly picks out what rightness and wrongness are?

Typically, one supposes, giving expression to this conscience means to act in accordance with what that voice tells us. And often we do just that. But sometimes, we falter, then fail. Here we seem called upon to distinguish between two paradigms. The first is *reflexive*

–as when we desire something, or to do something, but we consciously refrain from putting our hands on it or from doing it because we believe -our inner voice tells us- to be wrong. But we are not perfect beings and, whether we explain this to ourselves by appealing to Aristotle’s *akrasia*, or to an Augustinian duality of wills,<sup>1</sup> we often end up in real life choosing to do what our inner voice admonishes. So, even in the context of this reflexive paradigm, a reality-gap exists between our conscience and our expression of it. But there is a second, equally important paradigm to account for – where we stand before and try to relate to a happening or an event outside of ourselves. Let us call this ‘*relational*’: here we find ourselves being witnesses to, or victims of something our inner voice tells us -and therefore we believe- to be wrong, or unjust. If we find ourselves choosing to give expression to our inner voice here, what happens is that rather than turning a blind eye to what we see before us, or to us, we choose instead to *speak up*, or to stand up for what we believe is right, and

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<sup>1</sup> See the discussion on Augustinian duality by Hanna Arendt in the essay ‘What is Freedom?’, *The Portable Hanna Arendt*, ed. By P.Baehr (New York: Penguin Classics),2000. *Akrasia*, on the other hand, is the condition as defined by Aristotle where one cannot bring oneself to act as one rationally recognizes to be best for one to do.

against what we believe to be an injustice. In standing up this way we would be challenging the act or decision in question, expressing our resistance to it, and our dissent from it. Since, however, we know doing this would in many contexts constitute a provocation to the party we believe to be the wrong-doer, we are aware that a certain risk in the form of some retributive measure can be expected. Thus it is that Professor Koningsburger, after whom this lecture is named, spoke up to denounce the then-growing practice to discriminate against Jews at this university during the time when Nazism was on the rise in Europe. He stood up for what he believed was right. It is in such relational contexts that we would regard the act of giving voice to conscience as being noteworthy, and brave. It is particularly so when we realize that, human and imperfect as we are, most of us often may falter here, and fail the test of voicing our dissent and disapprobation. Drawing on one justification or the other, we often end up preferring silence to *speaking truth to power*.<sup>2</sup> Acting on the other hand in accordance with

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Said gives us a comprehensive view of how public intellectuals are presented by different writers in his Reith Lectures series (see below). Drawing on the seminal writings of Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* and Julien Benda's *La Traison des Clercs* he starts off by distinguishing between two paradigms, that of the

one's conscience is how we would typically describe the person –or group- concerned in such situations as having decided to *break* this silence. Thus it is that a group of Israeli soldiers critical of Army practices in the occupied territories have chosen to gather themselves under the umbrella of an organization they chose to call 'Breaking the Silence'.<sup>3</sup>

The different contexts in which we understand Professor Koningsburger on the one hand, and the Israeli soldiers on the other, as having acted in accordance with their conscience, or consciences, raises questions about the meanings both of conscience and of the wrongs or injustices being challenged. Is it correct to speak of consciences in the plural, or is conscience just one, pure and simple? If people have different consciences, can they be contrary to one another? If so, are moral wrongs or injustices the same for all, or can they be different for

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elitist and that of the engaged citizen, showing his preference for the latter, and arguing in favor of there being absolute moral truths/values which should be upheld by the intellectual as an engaged citizen. I address these issues (and others) in what follows.

<sup>3</sup> See their reports at <http://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/>. Many Israelis refuse to serve in the occupied territories, and are incarcerated as a result. Some of those who serve have had experiences leading them to speak out against Army practices. Their stories are recounted in the link to the above blog.

different people, and even contrary to one another? What differences do different contexts make to our being able to answer these questions? Koningsburger outrage was against a policy being imposed on the university by a foreign Nazi regime. In many ways, this outrage already had resonance with the student community, as well as with his peers. In contrast, the Israeli soldiers' outrage is aimed at their own leaders, and expresses a dissenting voice to how their own Government treats another people, who are under its occupation. It is a voice regarded by the overall military establishment as being harmful to its operations -almost as a breach of Israeli security, and as an undermining of the overall policies it tries to implement.<sup>4</sup> Meanings here seem to conflate with one another. Are there lines to be drawn that could help us clarify to ourselves how to understand conscience, and how to understand what right and wrong are? And how

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<sup>4</sup>Various Israeli groups –including academics- have formed over the years to protest the treatment of Palestinians by their Government. On one occasion recently, one group convoked a conference named after Julien Benda's aforementioned work, *Treason of the Intellectuals* (Transaction Publishers.2006. Trans. And introd. by [Roger Kimball](#)) to discuss whether Israeli academics were betraying their country by not speaking up and working more openly against their government policies. I refer to this event in my *Une Allumette Vaut-Elle Toute Notre Philosophie?* Flammarion, 2012. See below also for the more complex examples of the 'whistle-blowers'.

to understand what acting in accordance with one's conscience means?

It was in connection with the later trial of Nazi leader Eichmann in Israel in 1961 that Hanna Arendt, in an attempt to understand and explain Eichmann's inhumane motives, invoked Socrates, attributing to him the source of what eventually came in the Western tradition to be described as conscience.<sup>5</sup> There are two aspects of this Socratic background that I would like to highlight and to distinguish from one another- both together providing us I believe with the answer to our initial question about how conscience and speaking up are connected: there is, first, the famous passages in Plato that Arendt quotes where Socrates speaks about the compulsion to be at one with oneself<sup>6</sup>; and there is, second, that other side of the story, namely, of Socrates describing himself as a gadfly with respect to the people around him. In this dual role, what we could understand Socrates as doing is to *externalize* his inner voice with respect to the people

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<sup>5</sup> Hanna Arendt, *Eichmann In Jerusalem* 1963.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, *The Life of The Mind* New York: Harvest Book, 1978, Vol. I, 5. Arendt uses two quotations from Plato's *Gorgias* and *Hippias Major* to argue that bringing two opposed constituents into harmony is precisely what self-examination in Socrates is all about. See next note.

around him –as if to say that being ‘one with himself’ means (at least in part) acting as if he were their own audible conscience. Recalling the distinction between the reflexive and the relational, it is as though we are being told these two –the *daimon* and the gadfly- are somehow, or in their most perfect state, inseparable: I see a wrong being done to someone else. This perception immediately positions me as a third party in the equation. My conscience prompts me to speak up. Should I or should I not? The focus now is on myself. True, the wrong is being done by and to others, but seeing it, and having my conscience now prompting me to act, I am now in the reflexive mode. The right and wrong things to do are no longer about how others are behaving towards each other. The wrong I now feel and face is that of my not speaking up. Whatever now goes on as I go about making up my mind is entirely about me, and my response one way or the other (though initially prompted by a third party) would be to what I feel is right or wrong for *me* to do. What started out as a relational event has now produced a reflexive experience. If I falter, and stand back, I know I would not be acting as my

conscience tells me I ought. But there is more: Reason now tells me that not acting as I now feel I ought to puts me in a quandary. How can I justify to myself a refrain on a wrong I am tempted to do –tuning myself to what my conscience tells me to do when the matter concerns my own desires- if such a temptation, or what I feel to be wrong if I do it, is to turn a blind eye to (choose to be silent before) a wrong being committed by another? Besides the impulse of conscience, therefore, other factors now intervene, including Reason. But however it works out, making a choice in the relational domain clearly extends into a choice in the reflexive domain. Ideally, the two would be inseparable, as if organically tied. But in practice they are often parted from one another: for one reason or the other (fear? prudence?...), I may choose to be silent. I shall return forthwith to discuss these reasons, and the curious public role Socrates has in this manner appropriated, and from which originates an entire epic in the history of political thought concerning the role of the philosopher –thought of as being someone who can easily discriminate right



from wrong- from that of being a political leader at one end of the spectrum, to being a silent recluse at the other.

It is not necessary for us here, as we seek to understand what conscience is, to pursue Arendt's arguments and conclusion with regard to Eichmann as a paradigm – wondering whether it is simply the internal dumbness and total absence of internal self-questioning that explains how human beings can be without conscience, and bring themselves to act as he did; or whether, besides this, and as one of her critics says, it is the fear of self-censure<sup>7</sup> consequent upon committing an injustice that acts as the real deterrent, rather than conscience as we commonly understand it. Indeed, at some point in the debate, these two views may not in the end be totally exclusive of one another. Rather, where I wish to go from here – and where I believe we can benefit in our journey of exploration by having a more comprehensive view of human nature- is to look more closely into what speaking up, or speaking out against an injustice, might

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See '[Arendt, Socrates, and the Ethics of Conscience](#)', by Mika Ojakangas,  
[www.helsinki.fi/collegium/eseries/...8/008\\_06\\_Ojakangas.pdf](http://www.helsinki.fi/collegium/eseries/...8/008_06_Ojakangas.pdf)

mean. The first pertinent question to ask here, to my mind, is whether and under what conditions the reflexive and relational paradigms can be severed from one another, and whether the one can function fulsomely irrespective of the other, such that the person's dispositional attitude to the one may be partially or wholly contrary to his/her dispositional attitude to the other. In other words, where I wish to begin is to try to understand what Socrates himself tells us in his *Apology*:

*“ . . . for you may be sure , gentlemen, that if I had meddled in public business in the past, I should have perished long ago and done no good either to you or to myself. Do not be annoyed at my telling the truth; the fact is that no man in the world will come off safe who honestly opposes either you or any other multitude, and tries to hinder the many unjust and illegal doings in a state. It is necessary that one who really and truly fights for the right, if he is to survive even for a short time, shall act as a private man, not as a public man.” (Plato, 437; 31d6-32e3 ).*

It may be thought that the message Socrates here wishes to convey is ambiguous –does he or does he not exhort us to speak up? Is he suggesting a *limit* to how much, or a *time* as to when one ought to speak up? He seems to be

suggesting that a distinction be made –even for a person such as himself- between having private and public roles. Having a public role would immediately place him in direct confrontation with his peers over the unjust and illegal doings in the state –a matter that would quickly lead to his death– an outcome that would be useless both to his community and to himself. Having a private role, on the other hand, buys him time. Even then, he tells us, for a person such as himself who really and truly wishes to fight for the right, having this private role will not proffer more than a short breathing space. Presumably, we are led to understand, such a person would soon or eventually have to shed his private role, and to begin meddling with public affairs. His days, in such a case, would be numbered. As we well know they were in his case.<sup>8</sup>

For the man for whom the unexamined life is not worth living, nor is the life of an unprincipled fugitive, speaking up, opposing the unjust and illegal doings in a

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<sup>8</sup> A few lines before the previously quoted passage, Socrates tells us it is that voice which he started hearing as a child -which *forbids* but *never commands* him to do anything- which is the reason why he has always been deterred from being a politician. His gadfly role would then seem and by definition to be that of trying to change the system from without.

state, and insisting on saying the truth is as clear a categorical imperative as anything can be. In this case, the reflexive melts into the relational. Even so, the process (from private to public) is carried out prudentially -not all at once. While he is just as inimical to a wrong done by himself as he is to a wrong done by others, and while silence for him *as a strategy* is not a choice, silence as a *temporary prudential* measure may well be necessary –not as a means to escape an inevitable –perhaps even an existential- confrontation, but as a guarantee for best results. But he is surely well aware that silence for others may well be as a strategy –prudential admittedly, but permanent. When it is, one assumes he realizes that it is the fear of retribution or weakness of the will that would stand in the way. Here, then, it is not the fear of retribution –even self-retribution- that explains acting in accordance with one’s conscience, but the opposite: it explains why one might *not* act in accordance with one’s conscience. Indeed, if fear figures at all in the picture of the ordinary cases where someone feels called upon to speak up against an injustice, it figures as a natural feeling that the person

concerned overcomes. For Socrates, then, for the wholesome person of conscience, or for what in some of the later traditions<sup>9</sup> was regarded as how a true philosopher should be, the reflexive and the relational are one, though they may, like the notes of a single symphony, be sequentially ordered. And just as acting in accordance with one's conscience relationally constitutes a partial fulfillment of moral wholesomeness, acting in accordance with one's conscience reflexively –not to submit to temptations (such as to escape a death sentence) complements that fulsomeness of the moral life.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> As philosophical texts began filtering into the early Islamic period, and the interest in philosophy grew, what sort of life Socrates led became a major focus of attention, where what *being* a philosopher (or living the just/virtuous life) meant, became as or more important than what he *wrote*, with views of those engaged in the debate ranging from the ascetic/*sufi* approach requiring the philosopher to live the life of a hermit to that demanding less austerity and a balanced involvement in human affairs. We get a glimpse of the full range of this debate in the self-defense written by Abu Bakr al-Razi's *The Life of the Philosopher* (first translated into French by Paul Kraus in "Raziana I," *Orientalia* 4 (1935): 300-334). It may be of interest to note that it was Kraus who discovered and first brought to Leo Strauss's (see below) attention the MS by Al-Farabi on the Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, which fitted into Strauss's developing theory on the art of philosophical writing.

<sup>10</sup> It is arguable, of course, that a morally wholesome person would ideally not only react to an injustice or a wrong-doing, but would be in a position to guide us proactively to what justice, and 'right-doing' also are. I elaborate on this 'model' below, as I try to formulate a profile for the morally wholesome person as a source of truth. But since this presentation deals primarily with reacting to a wrong-doing or an injustice, I have stayed deliberately clear of tackling conditions under which, in the context of jurisprudence, or the philosophy of law, moral-cum-legal maxims could be identified, or formulated. However, it may be important to note in passing here that Muslim jurists can be thanked for having been precursors in this field (*fiqh*), outlining, within the context of a continuing debate, what such maxims should be, and

The model of the morally wholesome person (in this reactive sense) may explain to us one side of the story – what acting in accordance with one’s conscience might ideally mean. But we are left with another side: that other potentially bothersome question of determining whether what that voice of conscience tells us is true –whether, in other words, that voice can be relied upon to pick out accurately what injustices and wrong-doings there are. Typically, we are less certain here of the observed experiences of others than we are of our own direct experiences –we don’t normally question the genuineness and veracity of our own protestations. This is a crucial distinction to which I shall presently return. But meantime, looking far and wide around us, let us ask ourselves the general question whether there is a unique and objective standard of measure the voice will always and only respond to –or, alternatively, a single conscience whose voice, whatever the circumstances, must itself be viewed as a that standard. What injustices,

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how they should be reached. For example, basing themselves on general principles they could proclaim that using force to extract confessions from a suspected thief is wrong, as it is in principle better not to subject a potential innocent person to such treatment than to subject a yet-unconfirmed guilty party to it. However, this subject would require its own treatment in a separate study.

if any, did Socrates have in mind over and above those specific instances that he himself witnessed and experienced in his own community? And what truths did he have in mind other than those truths that would expose these particular injustices? Would he have a single judgment –for example- to make about both the Koningsburger and the Breaking the Silence cases? Would such a judgment draw on the same moral truth? Indeed, are there universal or underlying moral truths he would think the man of conscience could discern behind the specific instances he encounters, and which he should bring to light? What are those? And, in this regard, would it help us to know how these truths could be found if we considered carefully the acts-in-context of the so-called public intellectuals –those who are called upon to (or claim they) *speak truth to power-* and that of the other social critics and dissidents in our day and age? Is their voice that of the truth? How could we tell? Or are we expected to know, somehow, what these truths are to start with?

It was perhaps in the 50s that the Quakers in the United States introduced the now well-known expression ‘speaking truth to power’. It was a public attempt to circumvent what many democrats in America at the time feared may become official U.S. support of fascism both within the U.S. and in the world at large. In time, the expression came to be associated with the so-called ‘public intellectuals’ –especially those identified with being sympathetic to the leftist side of the political spectrum in the United States. Noam Chomsky may today exemplify this kind of intellectual, but it may be very much to Edward Said’s credit that he articulated this role, in particular with regard to U.S. policies in South East Asia as well as in Palestine. But in doing this he raised a very critical question: leaving aside the power that is to be spoken to, what is the truth that has to be spoken?<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Edward Said specifically raises this issue in the fifth of his Reith Lectures *Representations Of An Intellectual*, which he titled “Speaking Truth To Power”, transmitted on BBC Radio 4, 9<sup>th</sup> August 1993 (downloaded on [http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/rmhttp/radio4/transcripts/1993\\_reith5.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/rmhttp/radio4/transcripts/1993_reith5.pdf)). This lecture series later appeared under the title *Representations of the Intellectual*, Random House, 1996.



*in effect, I am asking the basic question for the intellectual: how does one speak the truth? What truth? For whom and where?*

What he was trying to determine in this context was whether, and to what extent the ‘rights-sensitive’ intellectual is culture-bound, or should or should not be. If we grant that giving voice to conscience comes down to meaning to speak up, or to speaking truth to power, the question remains whether such truths are objective and universal, and whether conscience, being of a likewise nature, can therefore identify them. Re-stated, our question here would be: Are these two –conscience and truth- always in a one-to-one correspondence relationship? Or could we conceive of them as being totally separable, conscience remaining constant in meaning, but the truths and injustices being voiced by conscience changing across cultures? If our first critical question was how to understand our reflexive and relational reactions to the voice of conscience, our second critical question is to ask if that voice is prompted by the same moral infractions in the world around us. Another way of putting this is to ask whether, as a public (or ‘rights-sensitive’) intellectual, Edward Said’s moral

voice would correspond with that of (the Israeli writer) Amos Oz; or whether it would tell him the same things had he been Israeli? I realize this (latter) is a hard, even perhaps an unfair and impossible question to answer. But it does make one wonder whether having a conscience at all means having one across cultures –that it is not context-specific; and is tantamount to seeing the same moral truths in them. Or whether, conversely, disagreeing on what to consider as moral truths compels us to conclude that what we call ‘conscience’ is in fact breakable into many different consciences, each speaking to us with a different language. How could we explain a situation to ourselves where, for example, one of us would (truthfully), in voicing their conscience, speak out in defense of the right of a Jewish State to exist (in Palestine), and another, also acting in accordance with their conscience, will speak out (again truthfully) against this as an instance of injustice? Are there two truths here, and two consciences? Or is one’s judgment here (whichever of the two it is) culture-bound, and therefore not an instance of a real voice of conscience? How would Socrates have viewed the matter? Would he have said

that for him ‘who honestly opposes the multitudes in order to hinder the unjust and illegal doings of the state, and who really and truly fights for the right’ it is necessary to transcend his or her parochial identity, and to seek what the voice of a universal *human* conscience would tell him? And how could one identify that conscience, and what would *its* voice tell him to stand up for? Or would Socrates tell us that we needn’t dispossess ourselves of our contingent identities, and that all we need do is simply to see the world through a different prism, one that will guide us on a case-by-case basis, and that will necessarily position us in conflict with ‘the multitudes’ around us? This is, after all, exactly the position Socrates placed himself in.

In order to answer these questions, and to make the move from considering what conscience means to considering what truth means, and how they relate to each other, it may be useful as a first step to consider carefully the individual cases and contexts where conscience is being given voice to, and a moral truth is being invoked. How can we tell -whenever such ‘truths’ are invoked- besides

there being certain observable and concurred facts before us, these acts are indeed wrong? The challenge here clearly goes far beyond its being a ‘fact-finding’ mission. What we normally tend to do on such occasions is to consider various other elements (including other facts) associated with the event, primarily drawn from those further “truths” that are already inculcated in us. In other words, we take recourse to an already-existing moral calculus we carry around with us. But this process clearly begs the question. How could we tell, with regard to any one of those further truths that are nested in our calculus, they indeed are as we claim them to be?

When the issue concerns the world of physical objects, language and logic experts generally concur that our entire body of reference (and therefore of truth) must rest ultimately on *ostension* –that visible and observable act of giving a name to something physical by pointing at it. This primary consensual agreement by speakers of the language allows for a methodic construction of an entire theory of truth. Were we to apply a similar model to the moral world, however, we would immediately find

ourselves confronted with two related but often inconsistent circumstances –that there indeed are what one might call ‘psuedo-ostensive’ acts, as when someone refuses to do or speaks out against a particular wrong; but that the moral *calculi* of different persons or groups are not always congruent. How can we tell, whenever such truths are invoked, that they are indeed as they present themselves as being? Because ‘the voice of truth’ being expressed in such instances is prompted by a special subjective experience, we often find ourselves first drawn to look into ourselves and our own experiences in comparable situations in order to judge whether the act before us is genuine –the measure being what we ourselves feel and go through as and when we go through a similar experience. This may clear the grounds for us for taking the claim being made more seriously. But the conundrum persists and compels us – assuming a hypothetical circumstance in which we abstract from our own moral calculus altogether, or are at a loss to find the relevant maxim in our calculus that would guide us- to give as much weight to the moral character and credibility of the speaker himself doing the

pointing out , as much as to the declaration being highlighted. Historically (and I shall return to this below) communities have generally tended to allow themselves to be guided in these acts of psuedo-ostention on ‘moral leaders’ (high priests, religious functionaries, those regarded as righteous, etc.) whose words were accepted as ‘given’ truths. Their moral enunciations simply grew over time to become moral maxims accepted by those communities. It stands to reason, given this background, that it is what sort of person Socrates was as anything else that makes us take his voice seriously. Therefore, as we now try to decide *on how to decide* whether the case before is one where a moral truth is enunciated that we look more closely at the person making it –besides considering the circumstances and content of the pronouncement itself..

What we would be looking at are events of acting in accordance with one’s conscience that may be private or public. By ‘private’ in this context is meant primarily those situations where, within a closed sphere that well be limited to a few people, a person will stand up to an

act or a decision he views as unacceptable or an intolerable infraction of a moral maxim or principle. The same circumstance would obtain at the public level, but here the person's voice of disapprobation reaches far and wide. In both cases, of course, our assumption would be that, given the disapprobation, the moral truth being enunciated could be expressed as being precisely the converse of the disapproved act or decision. In the two cases (private and public) an act of pseudo-ostention to a moral truth is being performed. However, unlike cases of physical ostention, these are neither independently verifiable nor are they resolvable. We cannot therefore simply take an act of pseudo-ostention at face value, as truly picking out a moral truth. That is why we need to scrutinize closely both the circumstance of the act, as well as the actor himself.

What would our search after truth through scrutinizing the speaker/actor consist in? Taking our cue from the Socratic model let us once again look more carefully at the roles that modern-day dissidents, critics and public intellectuals play (we can incorporate later the more

private or ordinary cases into the picture). Here it is important to note that while the ‘speaking truth to power’ paradigm generally assumes the power in question to be that of Government, with Socrates it was ‘the multitudes’ –even though, in a direct democracy these were indistinguishable from the institutions of power) that he had to confront. And while dissenting public intellectuals, critics, activists and others generally address themselves to those multitudes in order to garner support from them in opposing Government policies or decisions, it is precisely *in the name* of those multitudes –and not in opposition to their expressed views- that the critics and public intellectuals presume to speak. This difference is important to take note of because of the risk involved, paradigmatically, to the critic who braves the actions or emotions of a surrounding mob or a community: a classic case is that of Spinoza confronting the mob attacking the quarters where the De Witt family lived. In doing that he was clearly putting his life at risk. In the context of the present-day Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we can think of a similar stand taken by a Palestinian school-teacher, say, who will place himself in



the way of a youthful mob haphazardly attacking an Israeli army jeep or a private vehicle passing in front of their school, inevitably inviting a confrontation that can end up with the death of one of the pupils and the closure of the school; or a group of Palestinian intellectuals who, in the heat of an indiscriminate suicide campaign targeting Israeli civilians, will stand up to denounce the use of this method of resisting occupation. Clearly, such a teacher would be placing himself in the line of fire, and such intellectuals would be inviting a public wrath against them. In such cases, the power being stood up to courageously and at great risk is one's own community, and the immediate and personal dangers being braved are crystal clear from the outset. It is such situations that should invite us to take very seriously the moral message being expressed, its very veracity being vouched for by the courage displayed in expressing it.

Notwithstanding, Socrates may here tell us that speaking out on behalf of these multitudes still fulfils his criteria for someone who fights against injustice –the condition being the knowledge *that no man in the world will come off*

*safe who honestly opposes either you or any other multitude, and tries to hinder the many unjust and illegal doings in a state.* But the cases he envisages, in other words, are still those where a clear risk is involved- indeed, possibly an existential risk. While as was said what he has in mind as the main source of risk is the public, he would presumably concur to admit other sources, such as that coming from the State itself, or from a malevolent power lobby in the community.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, he may even include lesser risks resulting from acting publicly in accordance with one's conscience, such as those to one's career or status. But he would definitely not include those critics or public intellectuals who will address the multitudes simply in order to find themselves the center of public admiration and recognition for the 'truths' they give voice to.<sup>13</sup> For while on the one hand the truth being

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<sup>12</sup> Consider, for example, the case of Anna Politkovskaya in Russia, whose investigative pursuit of corruption led to her assassination in 2006. The belated arrest and trial of the officer accused of her murder has not stopped people from questioning who the real party was that ordered the killing.

<sup>13</sup> Unlike the previously cited case in Russia, an investigative journalist writing in the United States against corruption involving big business as well as Government may well simply find himself basking in relative wealth and popularity - Greg Palast, an active writer and blogger -see *The Vultures' Picnic* on major oil deals, for example- is one such case. But the fact of his popularity (or the fact that he may bask in it) does not undermine from the more important fact that his investigative exposures have a very important moral message to convey. Even so, the absence of the risk factor (within his own country) in his case may well exclude him from the list of those critics whom we are trying to highlight as paradigm guides for moral truths. At the other end of the spectrum, also excluded would obviously be those public intellectuals

voiced in the more genuine cases may well be that of the suffering voiceless, on the other hand it may well just reflect a coarse plebian passion, the intellectual in this case simply trading self-examined conscience for public admiration. This is not to discard altogether public critics who happen to express the passions of their constituencies, and who are held in admiration for that reason, but the measure here of those critics being true to themselves is the risk to themselves they would be taking in voicing public discontent. Palestinian critics of the various measures of Israeli occupation, for example, could here be regarded as a model, as well could also be prisoners on hunger strike: their voice in both cases is raised against Government policies, and the life-threatening risks they take in acting in accordance with their conscience once again vouch for the sincerity of their moral messages.

More commonly, however, the critic Socrates has in mind is one –even within a democratic system- would more likely be someone who speaks out *against* rather

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who are ‘co-opted’ by Big Government or Business, as Edward Said tells us in his Reith Lectures.

than in support of public views. Socrates of course had his close circle of friends, Crito (who wished to persuade him to escape the death sentence) being among them, but it is with the majority of his community that his views and course conflicted. Transposed to our day and age, we can imagine such a Socrates to be dissenting from majority views around him, more than we can imagine him speaking in their name, and voicing their discontent in a comfortable and democratic environment. We can imagine him speaking out and defending views denounced by his community as being heretical, if he felt the views upheld by his own community were wrong or unjust. Or, if he were to speak up against Government, it would typically be under one that is likely to censure or imprison him, as in many countries in our modern world, rather than in one where he is more likely to be able to pursue his ordinary life and career. This is not to say that we cannot contemplate people acting in accordance with their conscience in democracies, but it is to say that an important condition for the fulfillment of the Socratic role –or particularly, for believing the ‘truth being told’ in the case under review- would seem to be one where a

tangible risk is being taken, or where the audience being targeted is likely to be provoked into retributive action against the speaker, whether as a public or as an authority.

In sum, then, assuming we start off with a blank instead of our moral calculus, or that we fail to find a reference point in our moral calculus that we could use as background reference to help us decide whether what we see before us is a ‘moral truth’, then for us to regard our critic as ‘a guide’ or ‘a pointer’, and to hold his act of pseudo-ostention believable as true, various conditions would need to hold, including above all a challenging commitment by the speaker that is known will exact a high price to himself- including the price of death. The commitment and the degree of risk involved are both normal as well as reasonable factors for determining how credible, and believable therefore, both the person is who has stood up to challenge an injustice, and what he has to say about the matter. But whether in the first (mild) kind of cases in democracies like those cited, or those that involve life-threatening situations, the critic’s very foray into a controversial issue with the purpose of exposing

what they regard as an injustice or a wrong-doing, their observable commitment to that cause, as well as the facts of the case –all contribute towards giving weight to the credibility and veracity of the protestation or exposure being made. True, it is possible that a moral consensus over that issue in that community may not be complete, and there may be cases (such as the issue of abortion, capital punishment, etc.) over which the community may remain divided, and where the credibility and veracity of opposite claims may seem to carry similar weights. But there are a sufficient number of examples and cases where a general concurrence in the community can be eventually reached to make us appreciate how a moral consensus over an issue can be built over time.

However, there are those more difficult cases where ‘the public’ being targeted is a much larger audience, covering one’s own community but also the world at large -where ‘speaking the truth’ can be considered a breach with what the government of one’s own country (and even one’s own countrymen) might view as a breach of security, or even as treason square and simple.

Here, consensus-building would seem to be far more difficult –perhaps even impossible- to achieve, despite the fact that the moral claims being expressed may seem to carry their own independent ‘truth-weights’. Take, for example, the cases of so-called ‘whistle-blowers’, such as those of Mordechai Vanunu, the Israeli nuclear whistle-blower, and of Julian Assange, the man behind Wikileaks: In both of these latter cases, let us at least for the sake of argument assume that the primary motivation for exposing ‘state secrets’ was their concern for a wider cause than that of their respective countries, and was not either pure malice or simply to cause damage to the State itself. Would Socrates then have seen this as a paradigm of remaining one with oneself and being a gadfly at the same time –of braving the powers-that-be for the sake of exposing a moral wrong? This is to put our earlier question about identity (is national or religious identity a red line not to be broken?) in practical contemporary terms. And, Vanunu and Assange aside, countless examples from history can also be cited of individuals whose beliefs conflicted with those of their respective religious or national establishments, and who were

martyred or ostracized and banished for transgressing these borders, and for insisting to speak out.<sup>14</sup> Would Socrates here argue that such cases counted as examples of men who, attached to their contingent identities, yet managed to look at the world around them with a different prism?

The above are only a few examples of the myriad of cases where we might find ourselves before conflicting points of view. Not all are as hard to get general agreement on as others. But we constantly find ourselves challenged in the modern world by acts or events that are often raised by public intellectuals and critics and that demand of us to formulate a moral opinion: is abortion right? Is using a drone to eavesdrop on our own public right? Is using it to eliminate enemies of the State right? Is torture right? Is it right to let bankers and financial sharks off the hook who cause economic damage to the economy? Is it right for Palestinians to use armed struggle against the occupation? Is it right for them to

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<sup>14</sup> I am deliberately excluding here cases like those of the ideologically committed communist moles inside the British Intelligence Services in the third and fourth decades of the last century, where the introduction of the factor of *deception* totally transforms the ‘speaking out’ Socratic model I have been trying to explore.



target locations within Israel itself? Are there clear-cut answers to these and similar questions? Are there universally identifiable rights and wrongs we could all identify as being such? Or are our disagreements simply unanswerable? One way of addressing these questions, and of dealing with our underlying puzzle of how to relate conscience and truth, or to reconcile between them, is to briefly bring our sights down from these public cases to our own private lives, and to consider how we understand being responsive or not to our consciences at this level: here we may consider our own experiences, where we may find ourselves during the course of our lives or work- not purposefully seeking injustices to expose- but confronted with a moral challenge where we may be called upon by our conscience to take a stand which we know in advance would or could bring suffering upon us and our loved ones, and where we decide nonetheless to listen to this conscience, and in so doing to give expression to it by taking such a stand. The wrongs and injustices encountered here can be as varied and innumerable as the people who go through them, and they can be

experienced as few or as many times as the circumstances provide, the source of discontent indifferently being an institution or just another person. But, whatever the differences, we can see a common thread running through them- an inner sense of moral indignation arousing one to react. By extrapolation, therefore, whenever we face a situation where a public intellectual or an ordinary citizen taking a grand stand in opposing an established norm or a particular decision or act whether formally or informally condoned by his peers; or just another person trying to live through his or her private life but suddenly coming face to face with an invited moral challenge involving a decision with a fore-known price-tag – we can intuitively tell what it is that stands behind that action and explains it. We can understand conscience, in this sense, to be a common denominator, its voice however being sparked off in each case, perhaps in different degrees of intensity, to the tune of different truths the different individuals –again in varying degrees- feel bound to stand up for or to expose. We feel –regardless of the plurality of experiences and indignations- at least conscience is *monadic*, its meaning

always remaining the same and being understood as an inner calling to stand up to an injustice or to a wrong perceived as being done, and as giving voice to the moral truth that should be said in the matter - whatever that truth happens to be, *or is believed to be*.

This last comment is crucial. It doesn't detract from my sense of indignation over a fact being what it is if I later discovered that what I took to be a fact wasn't so. Any number of situations can be thought of where I can be said truly to have acted in accordance with my conscience only to find out later that the circumstances weren't quite what I believed them to be. Even if someone said that my having acted this way was not therefore justified, or a 'real example' of having so acted, it cannot nevertheless be denied that I acted this way precisely as an expression of my inner sense of indignation. To insist that there should have been an objective moral wrong against which I acted for me to be described as having acted out of conscience would be like insisting that it is only when something is true when I honestly claim it to be so that I can be described as having so claimed it. Clearly, I can honestly believe

something to be true, and say so, even when it is not. In sum, all that the monadic meaning of conscience requires for one prompted by an inner sense of moral indignation to speak up, is simply to have *perceived* what he encounters to be an injustice. It wouldn't detract from his being described in consequence as someone who acted in accordance with his conscience if it turned out that what he perceived was mistaken, or if it turns out that what he thought was the truth was not in fact so.

But if conscience, being monadic, comes to be decoupled from truth, this now being demoted to the rank of what is simply or possibly believed or perceived to be the case; and if we can now come to understand how the measure of risk of an act of pseudo-ostention prompted by conscience can be a necessary condition for signaling a particular moral truth, can we ever hope for an independent ultimate determination of what truth really is, or what to consider as being a wrong-doing or an injustice? Or can we rest comfortably with the proposition that moral truths are relative or indeterminable in any case, and it is sufficient for us to

allow ourselves to be guided by the voice of conscience to identify them in the particular instances we encounter them? And were we to contemplate this last proposition, could we find a way nevertheless to overcome the discomfort it may arouse in us –seeing that many outbursts of moral indignation can be ill-founded (the facts may be wrong), or even ill-fitted (we may not agree with its underlying moral assumptions), and even contrary to one another?

It is at this juncture of our journey that the Socratic model of the morally wholesome person –and more generally of the actor who knowingly risks his fortunes for the sake of expressing his indignation- could help guide us. Leaving aside the formidable (and perhaps fruitless) task of trying to find an independent means of determining what truth, and specifically moral truth is, we may find our path simpler if, persisting in our investigation of the relationship between conscience and truth, we try to find a cue to help us feel comfortable about the veracity of the truths said to be voiced by conscience in the various instances we may come across.

It is specifically these instances that merit our primary scrutiny, and as we scrutinize them it is the degree of our subjective feelings of comfort and confidence wherein the condition of sufficiency may best and most fittingly be sought. Paradoxically, our reliable starting point in this endeavor must therefore be ourselves –our own internal feelings as we experience a moral indignation prompting us to protest against all odds, or in the face of danger. It is this condition we must therefore seek to find as a sign in others –whether as a characterization of a particular act, or more generally as a disposition in their character. Our determination of a moral truth thus comes down to being reducible to our determination of the nature of the act itself of pseudo-ostention, and our characterization of the sort of person who speaks it. This may on a first reading seem like we would be turning the tables upside down: that instead of defining what moral truths are in order to determine who happens to voice them, we first should seek to characterize the kind of person who voices them, and the nature of the act itself, as a prerequisite for defining what these moral truths are. Such an approach would essentially mean that

characterizing such individuals comes down to begin viewing them as *a source of truth*, rather than simply as *transmitters* of it.

How can we set about establishing that level of comfort or confidence we need to have in the veracity of the moral indignations being invoked? Clearly, we need to identify conditions that could provide us with that level of comfort, and confidence. While a comfortably-leveled veracity standard cannot perhaps be immediately established to determine the rightful sense of an injustice being done if what we have before us is simply a single experience (coupling one particular claimant with one claim), surely our level of comfort and concurrence with the claimant increases in proportion to the confidence that is cumulatively built in us towards that claimant's moral standing and sense. Furthermore, such confidence and comfort are only likely to be further augmented if, recalling our earlier the reflexive/relation distinction, the claimant is perceived by us to be as tangibly bound by his reflexive conscience as he is by his relational, or comes to be viewed, in other words, as committed to

moral principles as these apply to him in his daily life and behavior as he sets himself out to be in the public arena.

Fully unfolded, this may sound like a far-fetched claim, for it comes down to proposing that what we in general regard as ‘truths’ (for moral truths can be argued to be but a sub-species of these) can only ultimately be defined in terms of the people holding them to be such. This claim has in some form indeed been defended by very eminent philosophers, of which my choice-analysis is that of the late Harvard logician W.V.O. Quine.<sup>15</sup> But the more specific claim of displaying the integral relation between moral truth and those who stand up for it may perhaps be an easier claim for most of us to digest,

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<sup>15</sup> See, especially, W.V.O. Quine *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (Columbia University Press, New York and London) 1969, where his seminal essay on Ontological Relativity –first delivered at Columbia University, is included as the second chapter. Chapter One (Speaking of Objects) is also relevant to our discussion. Quine has argued for his main thesis on the indeterminacy of translation in various works. Essentially, his point is that even physical ostention (see below) is indeterminate, except by reference to an overall logical model wherein consistency is maintained through linguistic cross-referencing. A famous quote by him encapsulating this thesis is ‘to be is to be the value of a variable’. A pictorial representation of his thesis envisages a spherical body of all ‘truths’ to be such as to be so constructed that adjustments to each one of them would require adjustments to others –less or more depending on its position in the sphere, with basic principles (logical and mathematical) lying at the center and therefore requiring radical adjustments throughout the system, and with moral and then social beliefs lying towards the periphery, and therefore requiring less adjustments.



especially when we begin to consider not just a single behavioral episode or an act done by a person, but that person's entire moral history and character. It is not being claimed that a single case of moral indignation is not a sufficient clue for us for identifying a particular injustice, and for identifying a particular moral truth, but that - in anticipation of what I shall be elaborating below - that person's moral credibility and our concurring with the moral truths he gives expression to is only reinforced in proportion to that person's overall moral character.

Let us then leave behind the common -but misguided, I believe- practice, of trying to understand or define what truth means as some abstract and ethereal entity, in isolation from the real-life situations where the seeking or speaking of truth comes in a package, so to speak, presenting us with a person's entire character. And let us focus instead on *truth-in-practice*, as we might describe it as and when it is being sought, being told, or being avoided or withheld, in real-life situations by real-life people. There are three observations I wish to point out about these situations: first, being truthful or not is in

general associated, when with a particular individual, then with other human traits that also characterize that individual on both the positive and negative sides -some of them being considered praise-worthy and others reprehensible. For example, being truthful is associated with being honest, lying with being dishonest. Honesty, on the other hand, is more associated with people who are known to keep their promises than to break them, who are upright rather than crooked, righteous rather than deceitful, and so on. We may thus collect together two distinct clusters or classes of all those different traits, identifiable perhaps by the two opposite epithets of good and bad –or morally upright and unethical. It is probably safe to say that the family of traits characterized as good are generally held in high esteem in most if not all cultures, while those displaying traits of the second kind are looked down upon, disrespected, and despised. These are of course only general parameters, permitting for all kinds of important exceptions, including the cases where a sudden and unexpected ‘swerve’ in the general pattern will allow even the worst of us on some occasions to act righteously. But it is common-sense to suppose that a

righteous and honest person expressing indignation at something they view as a moral wrong would in all probability be right in so viewing it, and could be taken as a reliable standard for the rest of us (whether immediately or in time) to believe it to be so.

The second observation I would like to make in this context is that all these truth-in-practice acts we are considering (telling the truth, suppressing it, etc.) are typically associated with some tangible, down-to-earth rather than with some ethereal or metaphysical subject. In other words, the typical situations where these acts are practiced are those in which those involved are judges or detectives or journalists, for example, trying to find out the truth, or criminals trying to suppress it. Significantly, it is not some ethereal philosophical meaning that is the object of attention in these cases, but some down-to-earth practical fact. This is more so the case when we are considering instances of moral protestations –whether these are expressed by us in our normal everyday lives, or are made an issue of in the public arena. This, by the way, is also what we might understand Socrates to have

been interested in- in this particular dialogue: as standing up to what he viewed to be *instances of injustice*, and *instances of wrong-doing*. This is an altogether different exercise from starting out by trying to elaborate on what justice is, or what truth means. One assumes, of course, he has already settled that matter for himself. But it is his conscience that prompts him to speak up, and when it does so, it does so in the face of a particular wrong he sees, and it is specifically from that wrong that he extracts a particular truth he feels called upon to voice.

However –and this third observation harks back to a point I already made- it is surprisingly not just or only the *facts* that play an essential role here, or only the people who relate to those facts as they are: it is often also, paradoxically, what are *believed* to be the facts, and how someone *honestly believing* them to be facts relates to them, that become incorporated into the general moral calculus distinguishing between the traits subsumed under the respective epithets of good and bad, or righteous and dishonorable. In other words, while we may disagree with the facts of the matter as someone

presents them to us or to others, we can still recognize that, in viewing them as representing a case of injustice he or she feels called upon to stand up to, he would be acting in good faith. Our judgment about the person would be complex, thinking them to be all the way from being misguided and wrong to being foolish. But over and above this, we could still respect the fact they stood up for what they believed was right. Our characterization of their moral motivation would not be affected, though we may legitimately question their other qualities, such as their faculty of moral discernment. This, again, however, is a quality that we can more confidently measure through experience, and over time. But considered generally, given the close association we can make out between the different qualities we believe to belong to the same cluster, it is not at all strange that we tend to have confidence in what someone we take to have moral discernment and to be morally upright tells us to be true. We wouldn't feel the same confidence and degree of comfort in what other people may tell us in similar situations. We wouldn't, for example, take seriously a politician's pontifications on human rights

when we know him not to apply them in his household. And lastly, the difference between Jean of Arc hearing bells and her believing she heard them is not one that, especially in retrospect, makes us think any the less of her. We respect her because –even under threat- she stood up for what she believed was the inner divine voice speaking to her. And for what it is worth, the voice may indeed have spoken to her. Therefore, what is often as important to consider in this context as actually being *right* in claiming what one says to be true, is in fact *believing it* to be so, and therefore being honest in standing up for it, and in thereby responding to the call of his or her conscience in doing so. The moral history of the person, besides the full expectation that voicing their conscience in this case (and others) is a *struggle* that comes along with a hefty price-tag - perhaps even fatal- is enough reason for us to take what they tell us as being a moral truth to be so –that, for instance, trying to escape a specific judgment passed by those competent and entrusted according to the laws of the land to make it is wrong. This last observation, referring us to the risk being taken, is surely another major circumstance that

influences our judgment of the rightness of the moral indignation being expressed.

In sum, then, my claim is that in order to determine a moral truth one need only look into the horse's mouth: It is paradigmatically *the right sort of person, manifesting the right sort of behavior, from whom one could learn what the right sort of thing to do is-* even when that person is oneself! Admittedly, this can result in admitting conflicting responses into our moral lexicon (as in the Said/Oz example, or as in a possible conflict over abortion or capital punishment, or the use of arms or war, etc.). But we might come to teach ourselves to accept considering such contradictory voices when they proceed from the right sorts of person as genuine moral puzzles in a pluralistic world that we still need to learn more about, and to learn from. Indeed, their very contrariness in such contexts may help develop our communal moral sense. It is not rationally disastrous if we admitted such possible contrary outcomes into our moral framework. It is not irrational of us *not* to consider this framework as a mathematical model where we would feel put out by a

Godel proving to us that we cannot show every moral truth in the world to be consistent with, and derivable from every moral truth in the system, and where, likewise, we cannot show that every moral falsehood is extraneous to it. Our human experiences after all far outnumber in kind even the infinite number of mathematical truths that can be produced by a mathematical system, and there is no reason why what one cannot show to be the case in rigorous system cannot also be true in the open field of moral behavior.

But returning to the horse's mouth, let me take leave here for a short diversion on the two Semitic languages, Arabic and Hebrew, where I believe an etymological basis can be found for supporting the claim of explaining moral truth in terms of the kind of person to whom it is attributed. In these two languages the trilateral consonantal roots *ts,d,q* –from which the word for ‘truth’ in both languages is formed- can also together form (in both languages) the word for being veracious -someone who speaks or says the truth. But it so happens that, also in the two languages, the very same roots then are also



used to form the word for being righteous – *Tsiddiq*. Such a person is not just one who happens to say something that is true (*a transmitter*), but he is a person to be believed, or from whom one can be guided to the truth (*a source*). In the Jewish tradition, Shimon ha-tsaddiq is revered as a pious and just high priest, a moral beacon for the community and a public leader. In the Islamic tradition, the first Caliph to take on the leadership of the Muslims after the Prophet was also called al-Siddiq. After the prophet- through whom the true word of God was spoken- whom other than a virtuous and trustworthy person, or someone who would be considered to be an unshakeable standard of the truth, could be trusted by the community to be a rightful heir? Indeed, looking beyond these two examples, we find human history replete with paradigms of moral beacons in whom all or a sufficient number of related qualities were clustered, effusing credibility in the moral truths they would espouse - with some at one end, like Jesus, being fully pure of heart, and others somewhere in between, like Socrates, or Ghandi, possessing faults, but nonetheless being archetypes to look up to. Together

with saints and many others, including, above all, also those who have stood up to give a voice to the voiceless, such as the suffragettes, all these are models that history has provided us with. And they are models that teach us, in addition to whatever else, to become aware of this important fact about truth, namely that, as a companion to conscience, it is very much a down-to-earth situation-by-situation affair, not some far-fetched metaphysical notion.

In sum, then, we tend to recognize and accept something as being a moral truth when this is expressed by someone we trust to be the sort of person who says the truth –who is honest, virtuous, pious, and so on. And we tend to disbelieve and suspect what looks like a moral indignation when we know that person to be dishonest, crooked, devious, dishonorable, etc. Indeed, I would venture to go as far to claim, as we consider word-references, and in particular what, in the context of meanings, what denotation, connotation, implication and

presupposition might mean, that it would make perfectly good sense to introduce the expression ‘*reference-spread*’ precisely to cover those cases where one adjective we might use in characterizing someone can be understood as referring at one and the same time to a number of other character-traits belonging to the same family and which are true of the person being described, and as excluding by the same token a number of opposite traits. In real-life situations, the rule is this spread of character traits, and it is the exception to assume that the person being described as honest, for example, is imagined to possess just that property, to the exclusion of those other properties that are usually associated with honesty. A person answering in their qualities to a positive reference-spread can surely endow their pronouncements on moral truths with the sufficient credibility –and therefore level of comfort among listeners- needed to make them be such.

Reducing the meaning of a word from the abstract to its reference-in-practice reality in real-life situations helps us understand not only what such words mean, but also

what speaking truth to power, or the ‘telling of truth’ that Socrates refers to is. In saying this I am not necessarily drawing on any particular school of thought –such as that of the contextualist theory of meanings, or, even –from the opposite theoretical perspective to that of Socrates- of Foucault’s characterization of truth as a practical instrument.<sup>16</sup> But if any such associations are felt to be helpful in elucidating my point they would certainly be welcome. But the association –even through Foucault’s perspective- with Socrates in this context is very relevant, especially if it helps us appreciate the dynamics that connect between what are essentially subjective experiences and intentions and what are identified as truths, in particular for our purposes on those occasions when conscience is involved.

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<sup>16</sup> The contextualist theory, in its purest form, would regard meanings as being entirely defined by language-use, where a necessary condition for coherence is a word’s exchange-value across different language contexts. For a recent appraisal of the origin and development of a contextualist approach see my review of Avner Baz’s recent work, *When Words are Called For: A Defense of Ordinary Language Philosophy* in the online journal *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* June 2012. Michel Foucault, who died in 1984, was on the other hand influential in introducing the concept of truth (and the structure of knowledge more generally) as an instrument of (political) *power*, thus also treating it as having a functional role as opposed to having an objective value.

What can one conclude, however tentatively, from these observations? I referred in the beginning to ‘an epic’ in the history of political thought concerning the role of the philosopher.<sup>17</sup> It is generally known that when Plato came to write his *Republic* he conceived of a just political order in which the philosopher would hold the highest public office. Even though he knew such an order would be an ideal, he argued that it is clearly best if such an Ideal is emulated to the extent possible. But would a moral agent survive having top public office in such a situation? Theoretically, he could if, even though he knew the truth, he didn’t spell it out as it is to the multitudes around him. Having different appearances, it can be expressed differently to different people. This way, he can survive. But, neither forsaking his conscience or truth, he could thus lead the republic towards what is best.

Plato’s thoughts on the subject, contrasted with the Socratic story, became a major source of influence in later thought, including in early Islam, influencing such

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<sup>17</sup> See, in general, for a comprehensive coverage of Greek and later traditions on this issue, Leo Strauss, and specifically his *Persecution and The Art of Writing* Glencoe, III: The Free Press, 1952. Reissued Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1988.

major philosophic figures like Alfarabi and Averroes – the latter partly known for his so-called ‘double-truth’ theory (specifically allowing for the different ways the same truth could be conveyed to the listener), and the former more known for advising a more retired role in public affairs. Indeed, the very question whether it is useful or advisable to meddle in public affairs at all –or even to choose to be a politician- was always one that found proponents on both sides of the divide. At one extreme, a brand of philosophical mystics in Islam interpreted the Socratic model as that of the total ascetic –believing that the true philosopher has no choice but to abandon society altogether. But the issue raised by Socrates remains: assuming you are the kind of person who is totally committed to fighting injustice inside your community, is it or is it not better to assume the role of a gadfly rather than that of a politician? Plato would seem to want you to assume a grand public office, whereas Socrates would seem to be telling you that such an endeavor would be summarily ruinous –for yourself as well as for your cause. However, if it in any way makes sense to claim, as I have done already, that a person’s

having conscience, and being truthful, go along with a whole package of other attributes that are integral to his or her character, such as being honest, and righteous, and just, and law-abiding, and virtuous, and decent, and so on, then I believe it becomes highly improbable that Plato's earthly king (in a pre-Ideal Republic) could in fact be such a person –as he would have to practice deceit, and not be honest, and would need to employ all the ruses associated with politicians in order to attain his or her objectives. Such a ruler can be described –if on the positive side- by other epithets, such as being clever, or successful, or visionary, but hardly as a righteous man, who will speak out against injustice no matter what, or who will insist on revealing the truth, however painful.

So I end up with the following claim, that while most of us are moral agents (gadflies) on some occasions and some of the time, only a select few of us pick up the challenge of being moral agents most of the time, and, depending on the surrounding circumstances, they stand to being ostracized to one degree or another, in proportion to the importance with which the subject-

matter being intervened in is viewed by the general public, and the intensity or degree of their intervention. Taking the cue from our earlier characterization of what sort of person the right sort of person is, we can take comfort in accepting the wrong-doings and injustices they point out as being actually such, and the maxims they extrapolate or extract from those cases and give voice to as moral truths. But going by the Socratic code, for a truly righteous man to remain such, and to remain able to speak up, and give voice to his conscience, he must so temper his interventions in society as a private person so as to maintain the ability to remain vigilant for the longest time possible, knowing full-well that his self-examined life is always at risk, but that this risk is precisely what his entire life is worth.

Sari Nusseibeh