

W. H. / 10/9/3

## Singularity and Plurality in Identity:

### The Case of the Palestinian Prisoner

I shall try in this presentation to focus on two elements which I would claim are constitutive of identity, which ~~one~~ <sup>be ed</sup> may/call the "egoistic" and "altruistic" components of the self respectively. For doing so I shall make use of an extreme example, that of a prisoner under interrogation, in order to bring out both the tug or tension between these apparently contradictory impulses of the self, as well as their complementarity in the constitution of a wholesome personality. The reason for choosing an extreme model is its heuristic value in bringing to light or to the surface what may otherwise be subdued or only partially developed instincts in an average situation. Interrogation is therefore a special circumstance in which basic instincts are tested in bareness, <sup>or under pressure</sup> so to speak.

Of course, the political context surrounding the example I make use of - namely, the Palestinian national struggle against Israeli occupation - is one which is already changing. But it serves to put in sharp relief exactly those tensions in the self which I wish to elaborate on, and which reflect the evolutionary process of both personal and national identity, or of the

singularity and plurality components in identity. The evolution of a national self as a special paradigm of the associative self next to and as an aspect of the singular self is itself a special case where we can see the relevant tug or conflict in sharp relief. However, if we went one step further in the life of a Palestinian political activist, and shared for a moment this activist's emotions and thoughts as he undergoes interrogation once under arrest, we may be better able to understand the nature of this tension, and its underlying impulses or instincts. My comments on this paradigmatic prisoner are based on long conversations with many Palestinians who actually underwent this experience.

Before I do this, I wish by way of drawing a frame for my later comments to spell out several working hypotheses, some of which I shall later come back to for a fuller elaboration and explanation.

**The first** working hypothesis is that identity contains both **in potentia** as well as **in actu** components, or objective as well as subjective aspects. Using socio-biologist terms, it contains what may be called "closed" as well as "open" genetic programs, with the latter being an interactive disposition relating to the outside environment.

**My second** hypothesis therefore is that identity is neither totally preset, nor totally composed. Using simplistic categories, this is to say that the self is neither a pre-existing, atomistic, unencumbered Kantian -like ego, nor is it an existentialist end-product of will and action. Rather, it has both aspects, reflecting genetically pre-designed but closed, and genetically pre-designed but open programs. This means that a process of formation or evolution is a fundamental constituent of identity.

**Thirdly**, the process of evolution or formation which is constitutive of identity is determined, among other things, by a primary natural impulse or instinct which in developed form is the will. Understood as being that impulse or instinct determining volitional action, it can be regarded as that element in the self which interactively relates to the outside environment, thus bringing about and determining the process of change. This means that, in an important sense, identities are volitionally carved out, or grafted.

**Fourthly**, there are two complimentary aspects to this impulse or will, one being egoistic and the other altruistic. The first explains the endeavor to seek the space or possibility for self-enhancement (i. e., self-protection, self- development, etc.), while the latter explains the endeavor to seek a similar space or possibility for others.



**Fifthly**, altruism can be interpreted either purposively or innocently. On a purposive interpretation, altruism is concealed egotism, and the associative dimension of the self is merely a heuristic device of the pre-existing self. In this context, associative impulses as secondary features can conflict with pre-existing egotistic impulses, and only the latter are considered to be constitutive of identity. On an innocent or genuine interpretation, however, the associative impulse is considered a constitutive element of the self's identity, and as such the "turbulence" created by the tug between the egotistic and the altruistic can be regarded as the very mechanism of the process of identity formation.

**Sixthly**, "natural individuals" as primary substances do not, strictly and specifically speaking, exist. Within the context of any aggregate of potential unit-selves, or of any potential "population", what exist are potential individuals which develop identities simultaneously at the unit and population levels. The atomic and community components of the self are thus grafted simultaneously as the two constituents of the self. Formally speaking, in other words, persons and nations are thus made, not created.

**Seventhly,** identity whether of person or nations, admits of degrees (VERTICAL).

**Eighthly,** the line associating the potential unit self with the larger potential group is a continuum. The links, or rungs, constitute a twilight zone. The line's extension (one other, family, tribe, nation, etc.) is a variable. The function of this variable is the associative impulse of the self (HORIZONTAL).



### **The Case:**

A Palestinian prisoner is undergoing interrogation. The interrogators' imperative is to break the prisoner's will. The interrogators assume that, if they succeed in doing so, then the prisoner will:

- (a) give valuable information about his colleagues, leading up to the breakdown of the leadership of the national resistance movement, and,
- (b) be taken out himself of the confrontation game, thus becoming one more deactivated enemy.

In order to achieve this purpose the interrogation team's approach is to drive a wedge in the twilight zone between the personal and the national components of the identity of the self, deluding the prisoner into thinking

that by abrogating the national component he would thus be gaining at the personal level. However, recognizing the difficulty of ripping apart the egoistic from the altruistic or associative components of the self, the interrogators will sometimes follow a different approach, namely, that of driving a wedge between the immediate (e.g. family) and the less immediate (i. e. national) associative circles of the self.

The method used is the classical binary one of reward and punishment:

**PUNISHMENT:** The infliction of physical pain. Psychological humiliation. The threat of elongated suffering, even of “accidental” death. The threat of harm to one’s family members and loved ones, etc.

**REWARD:** Respites from pressure. Promise of a light sentence, of a free and lucrative life.

#### **FOUR POSSIBLE RESPONSES:**

(1) The prisoner does not have a developed sense of his personal self.

His self-identity is predominantly associative. Thus even the possibility that he can survive a dissociation does not arise. From the interrogator’s point of view, he is a lost case.

(2) The prisoner has a developed sense of his personal self, and he regards his personal life as having a primary value. He is also aware

of the theoretic possibility of dissociating the personal from the associative or national components of his identity. Rationally, he calculates the implications of his choice and the harm that will physically befall him if he were to give primacy to his associative self. However, digging deeper, he realizes that he stands to lose his self-respect and his own identity for the sake of saving what will only turn out to be a physical shell of himself. Exercising his will, he resists the pressure on him, and feels wholesome as a result, whatever the physical consequences.

- (3) As in the second case, the subject is aware of the possibility of separation or dissociation. But unlike the case in (2), his resistance level is low. He has a weak will. In a sense, he decides that whatever the self that is going to be saved, it is more rational to survive with it rather than remain attached to his present identity. In other words, he rationally decides to forgo his present identity.
- (4) The prisoner is an accidental recruit to the national cause. Although he does not have a heightened sense of his personal self, he does not have a heightened sense of his associative self either. In general, one would describe him as having a weak identity. Therefore, faced with a real challenge, he has no moral or psychological problem about favoring his physical interest.



## **COMMENTARY:**

Human motivations being so complex, it is simplistic to assume that one has separate models of the personality as described above. However the distinctions can be regarded as describing motivations rather than developed personality models.

In general, one assumes that an average person experiences internal conflicts of the kind described above, even in normal situations. Note that the altruistic component of the self is regarded as an essential constituent of self-identity in the first three cases. In the third case, the rational agent realizes that his choice will imply a transformation of identity. Presumably, he believes that sufficient components of his identity will survive, at least the component of self-awareness. In other words, even he recognizes that the associative component is constitutive of his self-identity. But he decides it is better to commit identity-suicide than suffer further physical battering.

In case (4), the only one where the associative element is not developed, we find that self-identity is equally not developed.



In case (2), we find an example of the strongest form of self-identity, which is rationally carved out through conscious choice of will. The subject here is fully aware of the essential nature in his identity of the associative impulse, and he makes his choice on this basis. As a result, he manages to develop further this identity.

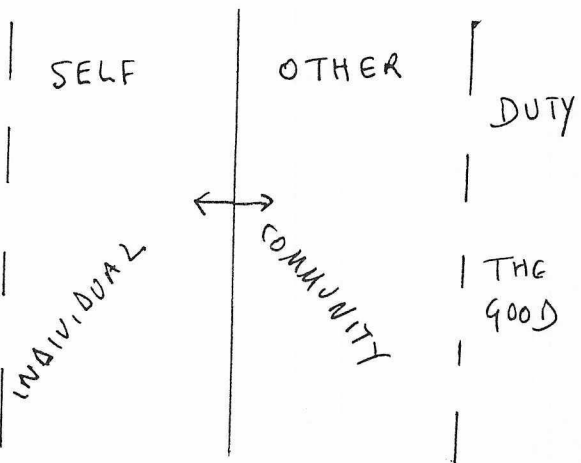
Returning to my initial hypotheses, I would like in particular to comment on the two different interpretations of altruism: clearly, if altruism were concealed egotism, or if, in other words, it were regarded as non-constitutive though necessary, then self-identity could be regarded as something which could be saved even in case (3). No identity-suicide need be contemplated. Furthermore, case (2) would be regarded as a romantic gone astray. However, my contention is that altruism should be interpreted genuinely as a constitutive component of identity. So regarded, the internal psychological conflicts – for example, those affecting the prisoner as he weighs his options – could be seen as a natural mechanism of identity growth, or evolution.

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EXCLUSIVE (EITHER/OR  
MODEL)

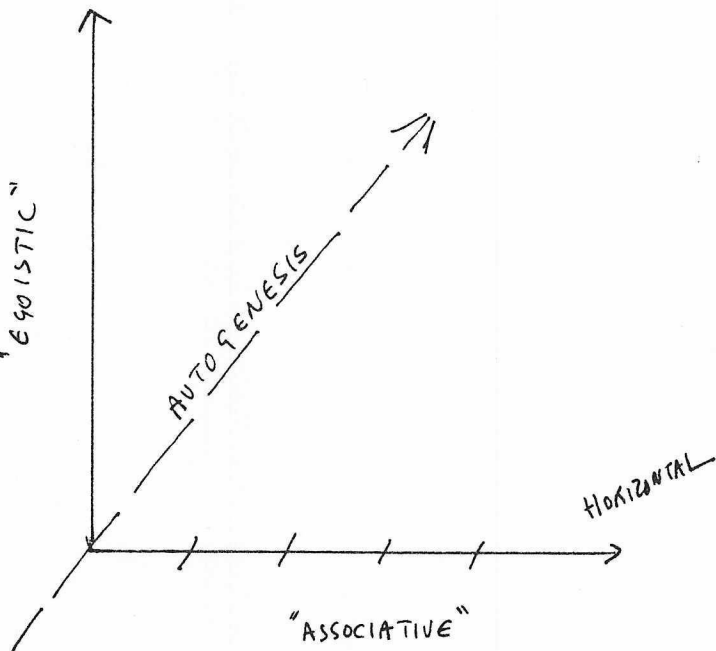
INCLUSIVE

RIGHT



'EGOISTIC'

VERTICAL



EGOISTIC

ALTRUISTIC

IDENTITY AS A PRIMITIVE CONCEPT

