

The Return of Abu Nasr al-Farabi

Paul A. Rahe
Hillsdale College

In 1986, a young Palestinian scholar teaching in a great books program at Birzeit University on the West Bank published an inflammatory article in the Jerusalem weekly *al-Mawqef*.¹ The piece—entitled “Annex Us”—was intended as “a thought experiment.” As he later observes,

Looking objectively at the essential Palestinian interest in freedom, I asked which scenario was preferable: autonomy or annexation with full equal rights in Israel? Answering my own question, I said that it stood to reason that as citizens of Israel we would wield far more power in shaping our destiny. A member of the Knesset elected from Tulkarem, say, would not only help pass laws for his home town, or for those areas in the Occupied Territories on which settlements were being built, but he would also participate in legislation for Haifa and Tel Aviv. The ballot box would give us what armed guerrillas never could: control over our own lives, *and over theirs*.²

In publishing what he hoped would be “a bombshell,” he did not seriously intend to bring about what he proposed: an Israeli annexation of the Occupied Territories and the enfranchisement of his fellow Palestinians. His “thought experiment” was, as the more astute of his associates at Birzeit quickly realized, a “ruse”—which is to say, its publication was “a tactical move aimed at waking up the Israelis” and at bringing them “back to their senses.” He intended it as a species of “shock therapy,” which would bring home to the Israelis who ruled Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank the true nature of their interests and the shortsightedness of their settlements policy. His message was simple: “Either we get our state, or they will have a battle for equal rights on their hands.”³

¹ Sari Nusseibeh, “Annex Us,” *al-Mawqef* (1986), cited in Sari Nusseibeh (with Anthony David), *Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), p. 240.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 240-41.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

This particular Palestinian knew what he was about. He was the scion of an ancient Jerusalem family. Born in February, 1949, he had grown up in the Holy City when it was controlled by Jordan. In the first years of the Israeli occupation, at the instigation of his father, he had learned Hebrew and had spent a summer on a kibbutz. After reading Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at Christ Church College, Oxford, studying for a year in London at the Warburg Institute, and doing a Ph.D. in Islamic Philosophy at Harvard University, he had for a brief time been a visiting lecturer at the Hebrew University. He was no friend to the Zionist project, but he was in no way hostile to Israeli Jews, and he thought that his fellow “Palestinians should only be playing games” that they could win, “rather than pursuing futile and morally dubious tactics such as guerrilla attacks against the military system that the Israelis had perfected, or engaging in flights of fancy.” All that was required for what he regarded as victory was for the subject population to bring home to its conquerors the indecency inherent in their continued rule over and exploitation of a people whom they would never be willing to admit as equals into their own citizen body. He viewed the Israelis in much the same fashion as Martin Luther King, Jr. viewed white Americans. These people were not instinctively indecent. If made to see what they were doing and to weigh the likely consequences, they would come around. In the long run, if the Jews in Israel were to come anywhere near to living up to the standards which they espoused—in the long run, if they were to be safe and secure in what was for them the Promised Land—they would have to “forget all about their settlement projects and their bogus schemes for Palestinian limited autonomy, all their silly talk of Judea and Samaria,” and either abandon the Zionist project and opt for the establishment of a binational secular state or embrace “the two-state solution as a gift from heaven.”⁴

I describe in some detail the “thought experiment” that Sari Nusseibeh engaged in a quarter of a century ago with an eye to its serving as “shock therapy” for the Israelis, because he uses precisely the same phrases to describe his attempt in his new book—*What Is a Palestinian State Worth?*⁵—to “awaken Israelis” and the rest of us “to the inhumanity of continued occupation” and to alert his fellow Palestinians to the nature of their true interests (pp. 11 and 13). There is a consistency in Nusseibeh’s thinking and in the public posture he has deliberately adopted that is reflective of extended rumination on the role that a man of philosophic disposition can and should play in public life.

At Harvard, Nusseibeh wrote his dissertation on the doctrine of radical metaphysical freedom developed by Ali Aa Hosain Ibn Abdallah Ibn Sina (the

⁴ Ibid., p. 240.

⁵ See Sari Nusseibeh, *What Is a Palestinian State Worth?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). Page references are in parentheses in the text.

figure known in Europe as Avicenna). But he did so only after having studied in depth the thinking of the political philosopher Abu Nasr al-Farabi under the tutelage of Muhsin Mahdi, and there he was persuaded to take to heart Leo Strauss's observation "that al-Farabi's Plato eventually replaces the philosopher-king who rules openly in the virtuous city" with "the secret kingship of the philosopher who, being a perfect man precisely because he is an investigator, lives privately as a member of an imperfect society which he tries to humanize within the limits of the possible."⁶ If Nusseibeh's thinking with regard to the capacity of the Israelis and the Palestinians to transcend the memory of the suffering they have inflicted on one another, to set aside their fears, and to live alongside one another in peace and with mutual respect derives from his reflections on Avicenna, the posture he has adopted as a public intellectual owes even more to his consideration of the theological-political doctrine first elaborated by al-Farabi and later taken up and applied by Avicenna, Averroës, Moses Maimonides, Marsilius of Padua, and Dante Alighieri.⁷ When the "religious zealots" in Nusseibeh's classes at Birzeit angrily reacted to his presentation of the thinking of the political philosopher whom the Arab philosophers revered as "the second teacher" and then published a pamphlet denouncing their professor as "the [false] prophet at Birzeit," he was delighted and had the pamphlet framed and put up on the wall of his office for all to see. If he were to do for his fellow Palestinians and their Israeli neighbors anything even remotely like what al-Farabi and his successors tried to do for the Arabs, Jews, and Christians of the Middle Ages, he would be exceedingly pleased.⁸

The real question is, of course, what "the limits of the possible" are in present circumstances. Nusseibeh's earlier efforts—before, during, and in the period immediately following the first *intifada*—contributed mightily to there being a political opening in the early 1990s. Had the Palestinian delegation at Oslo and those in the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) providing guidance to the negotiators been more astute, had they insisted on reaching something akin to a final status agreement at that time regarding Jerusalem and the Israeli settlements on the West Bank, or had Yitzhak Rabin and his successors adhered to the spirit of the agreement, the Israelis would not have aggressively expanded further their footprint in Jerusalem and on the West

⁶ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (New York: Free Press, 1952), p. 17, quoted in Nusseibeh, *Once Upon a Country*, pp. 145-46.

⁷ For an attempt to describe this doctrine and trace its origins and dissemination, see Paul A. Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar: Machiavelli and Political Theory under the English Republic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 59-83.

⁸ Nusseibeh, *Once Upon a Country*, pp. 145-50 and 182-83. In the remainder of his autobiography, Nusseibeh returns to these two thinkers and to Thomas Jefferson repeatedly.

Bank after the accord was signed on September 13, 1993, and the Oslo Agreements would not have turned out to be a false start. Even then, however, had Yasser Arafat not alienated his fellow Palestinians by setting up in the Occupied Territories what Nusseibeh aptly describes as yet “another version of a sleazy Arab kleptocracy,”⁹ had he been prepared to turn his back once and for all on armed struggle, and had he been willing to close a deal with Ehud Barak at Camp David in July, 2000, something akin to what Avicenna had in mind when he spoke of “miracles” might really have taken place. There was a moment when women and men of good will on both sides of the divide were ready, willing, and able to reach an accord and were sufficiently numerous to be able to guarantee that it would be honored. The story that Nusseibeh tells in his autobiography is a disheartening tale of missed opportunities, counter-productive greed, and outright corruption on the part of some politicians and of genuine malice on the part of others, and it allows us to see how the weaknesses and folly of the former played to the advantage of the latter so that, in the end, defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory. It may be a long time before there is another political opening as promising as this one was, and that time may never come.

When Nusseibeh dropped his first “bombshell” back in 1986, it rattled his fellow Palestinians even more than the Israelis. His latest “bombshell”—a proposal that East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza be annexed and that the Palestinians who reside there be accorded full civil, but not political rights—may well have a similar effect.

The Palestinians are not likely to find such a prospect enchanting. Those who long for a political community that they can call their own will be outraged, and even those who are inclined to think, as Nusseibeh does, that politics is “a means, not an end,” and that states exist solely for the protection of private rights will be skeptical in the extreme. The latter might be satisfied with a condition in which

farmers could tend their fields without being harassed by settlers and without fear of their land being confiscated and their trees and crops destroyed; . . . teachers and professors could be employed on the basis of their academic qualifications and not their security files; . . . people could move and travel freely; . . . companies could be established, services and institutions set up, houses and office buildings constructed. (p. 7)

But they are bound to ask, “How can our enjoyment of equality under the law be protected if we are disenfranchised? What leverage would we possess? How well were African-Americans treated in the South after they were deprived of the vote?” These are legitimate questions, and Nusseibeh’s suggestion that there be “an international guarantee” is not likely to reassure anyone (p. 16).

⁹ Ibid., p. 401.

Those Israelis who take pride in their possession of a political community that they can call their own or who merely believe that Jews, especially in the Middle East, can be safe and secure only in such a community are likely to regard Nusseibeh's proposal as a ruse—which, indeed, it may well be. "In the long run," they will no doubt ask, "how could we in good conscience permanently deny political rights to those who live alongside us within a state we share? And, given demographic trends, if we were eventually to enfranchise the Palestinians, would we not be laying the foundation for destroying the character of Israel as a Jewish state?" From their perspective, Nusseibeh's proposal is bound to look like a Trojan horse.¹⁰

Of course, this proposal may be a ruse of another sort. Nusseibeh is fully aware of the objections I have outlined, and he is an accomplished practitioner of the venerable art of rhetoric. He may or may not have read Theophrastus's advocacy of insinuation as a rhetorical necessity:

It is not essential to speak at length and with precision on everything, but some things should be left also for the listener—to be understood and sorted out by himself—so that, in coming to understand that which has been left by you for him, he will become not just your listener but also your witness, and a witness quite well disposed as well. For he will think himself a man of understanding because you have afforded him an occasion for showing his capacity for understanding. By the same token, whoever tells his listener everything accuses him of being mindless.¹¹

But he certainly understands the psychological principle that Aristotle's successor articulated in this passage, and he has made ample and repeated use of insinuation in the course of his career as a public intellectual.

A quarter of a century ago, when Nusseibeh dropped his first "bombshell," his aim was to induce the Israelis to negotiate a settlement with Yasser Arafat and the PLO. His purpose at this juncture may be similar, for he is clearly persuaded that the current situation is untenable. The territory left to the Palestinian Authority following the construction of Israel's Security Wall is, he quite plausibly asserts, more like a collection of Bantustans than like a country, and it is insufficient for the support of an independent state. When he expresses doubts as to whether land on the West Bank confiscated by the Israelis will ever be returned, he may be hoping—by drawing the disturbing

¹⁰ This would be even more emphatically true if his proposal were regarded—as, at times, he seems to think it ought to be regarded—"an interim arrangement" or "step"; see Nusseibeh, *What Is a Palestinian State Worth?* pp. 15-16 and 143-49.

¹¹ *Theophrastus of Eresus: Sources for His Life, Writings, Thought, and Influence*, ed. and trans. William W. Fortenbaugh et al., 2 vols. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1992), frag. 696. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

political conclusions that follow logically from this premise—to persuade the Israelis that it must, nonetheless, be returned. He does not say, “Either we get a viable state with East Jerusalem as its capital, or they will have a battle for equal rights on their hands.” But, of course, he did not say anything of the kind in the article published twenty-five years ago in *al-Mawqef*. He quite shrewdly left it to the Israelis to draw the proper conclusion for themselves, as many of them did. This time Nusseibeh is proposing “a thought-experiment” that is, he readily admits, “so objectionable that it might well generate its own annulment.” It might, he explains, make “all parties see the need to find a tenable alternative.” Or, “if adopted,” it might serve “as a natural step towards” what he puckishly proposed in 1986: “a single democratic state.” It might even, he tellingly adds, induce the two parties to this ongoing dispute to revisit a suggestion advanced in the wake of the first Arab-Israeli War by Jawaharlal Nehru’s India: that, in the territory in Palestine evacuated by the British, there be “a federal form of government” (pp. 13, 32-35, and 143-44).

In any case, whatever developments take place, Nusseibeh thinks that “Palestinians, just as much as Israelis, need to think deeply about what states are for,” and he insists that their function is “utilitarian”—that they are “means to enhance human well-being rather than to fulfill jingoist or religious imperatives” and that this understanding “needs to be brought to the forefront of their political consciousness” (p. 15). The phenomenon that worries him is “the tragic power of the spells human beings create and then become bounded by in pursuit of their own well-being.” What he has in mind are “meta-biological *structures*,” which “take the form of ideologies, norms, belief-systems, religions, regimes, states, and so on,” and “meta-biological *entities*,” which “take the form of gods, families, tribes, nations, political movements—in short, anthropomorphized higher-order objects acting as if they belong to the biological side of the picture.” It does not, he insists, matter which “form they take.” Either way, “they threaten first to dominate and then to dehumanize the real, flesh-and-blood individuals who created them in the first place” (pp. 13 and 96-98).

Nusseibeh is not the first to confront this challenge. As he is no doubt acutely aware, “anthropomorphized higher-order objects” of the very sort that he has in mind inspired murder and mayhem on an almost unimaginable scale in Europe in the wake of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, and philosophers—such as Michel de Montaigne and Thomas Hobbes—stepped forward in the fashion suggested by al-Farabi in an attempt “to humanize” the societies in which they lived “within the limits of the possible.” Moreover, the thought-experiments in which they engaged and the shock therapy they attempted to apply to their contemporaries by means of the books they composed have one crucial component in common with the argument that Nusseibeh articulates: they embody a systematic attempt to induce their readers to think as unembedded individuals, lower their sights, and quell the spiritedness within them that forms the basis for human attachments and so easily gives rise to rage. In his *Essays*, Montaigne does this gently and seductively, in a manner both charming and entertaining, by inviting those

who pick up his book to join him in a great variety of humorous and deflating ruminations focused on the solitary self. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes pursues the same end in a much more brutal fashion with a skeptical epistemology designed to shatter the claims made on behalf of “anthropomorphized higher-order objects” and a phenomenology of mind aimed both at explaining the origins of internecine conflict and at suggesting the manner in which a narrow, selfish focus on security and well-being might open the way to bringing it to an end.¹²

Montaigne, Hobbes, and their successors—including John Locke, Bernard Mandeville, and the Baron de Montesquieu—sought systematically to reduce the hold that “anthropomorphized higher-order objects” have on men and to promote civility within political communities and cooperation among them by debunking idealism, unleashing instrumental reason, and encouraging on everyone’s part a sane, sober calculation of material interests. The three last-mentioned authors in particular thought that the growth of commercial society and the habits of self-interested petty calculation that it would instill would dispel in considerable measure the illusions that give rise to religious and ethnic strife.¹³

In *What Is a Palestinian State Worth?* Nusseibeh chooses a different path, eschewing instrumental reason and its sober calculation of the dictates of material interest and embracing sentiment—above all, compassion (pp. 93-224). This decision I regard as a mistake likely, if it were to take hold among the Israelis and Palestinians, to be fatal to everything he holds dear. After all, Nusseibeh is not the first to have elevated compassion in this fashion. In reaction against the commercial republicanism espoused by Montesquieu and the French *philosophes*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau anticipated Nusseibeh—and in *The Social Contract*, *Discourse on Political Economy*, and the brief treatises that he wrote on Poland and Corsica, laid the foundations for the nationalism that brought murder and mayhem to Europe in the twentieth century on an even greater scale than had religious sectarianism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As its etymology suggests, compassion is

¹² See Paul A. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 249-398; and Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar*, pp. 22-100 and 245-320. Note also Paul A. Rahe, “Don Corleone, Multiculturalist,” *The Journal of Business and Professional Ethics* 16, nos. 1-3 (1998), pp. 133-53.

¹³ See Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, pp. 445-520; and Paul A. Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty: War, Religion, Commerce, Climate, Terrain, Technology, Uneasiness of Mind, the Spirit of Political Vigilance, and the Foundations of the Modern Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

a self-forgetting sentiment.¹⁴ It brings us into a species of union with those whom we pity and causes us to identify our fate with theirs. Unfortunately, however, this fellow feeling loses its force progressively as those within its compass grow more numerous and diverse, and it cannot effectively be extended to mankind as a whole. Compassion is contagious, but it is unreasoning and in its very nature partisan. It is conducive to an unmitigated fury directed against those thought to be responsible for the suffering of the men, women, and children who are its object. Compassion and hatred are, all too often, peas in a pod, and the Middle East in recent years has seen far too much of both.¹⁵

Nusseibeh may well be right in supposing that mankind has—at least in the last two-and-a-half centuries—made moral progress of a sort (pp. 150-66).¹⁶ But he is in error if he thinks that the process by which this took place has anything to do with the spread of compassion. The “universal human values” of which he speaks are first celebrated in the writings of Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu. They are the logical conclusion of the account they give of man’s departure from the state of nature along a path charted by the interplay between his desire for security and well-being, on the one hand, and instrumental reason, on the other. All attempts at peace-making follow precisely the same path. And on the practical level, as Montesquieu observes in his *Spirit of Laws*, it is the spread of commerce that fosters the requisite habits of thought.

Were I a Palestinian in Nusseibeh’s predicament, I would want to reflect on the story that the ancient geographer Strabo tells about the stages of development that took place in the Iberian city now called Empuries. There was a time, he reports, in which the people of this community lived “on a small island off the coast, which is called the Old City [*Palaiopolis*].” Later, however, they shifted to the mainland and resided in a city with two discrete parts divided by a wall. In one part lived the Indictans, a people indigenous to Iberia; in the other lived the Greek interlopers. The Indictans, we are told, wanted two things: to preserve their own polity and way of life, and to collaborate with the new arrivals in providing for the security of both ethnic

¹⁴ In this connection, see Paul A. Rahe, *Soft Despotism, Democracy’s Drift: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville, and the Modern Prospect* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 63-140, esp. pp. 116-40.

¹⁵ In this regard, one might want to reflect on the larger implications of what Aristotle has to say with regard to the dependence of *philia* (fondness) on *thumos* (spiritedness); see *The Politics of Aristotle*, trans. Peter L. Simpson (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), VII.7.1327b40-1328a5. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁶ I leave aside the price paid for this species of moral progress. To address it would require more space than I have been allotted and perhaps more patience than my disquisition deserves.

communities. The wall between the two parts of the city was designed to satisfy the first of their desires; the “common wall encircling” the two communities was intended to satisfy the second. “In time,” Strabo adds, “they joined together to form a single polity with a certain mixture of barbarian and Greek customs, as has happened on many other occasions.”¹⁷

In short, this city progressed from being a binational federation to being a unitary polity by becoming what Americans would call a “melting pot.” Its original name—from which the modern Catalán name is derived—was Emporion, which is suggestive of the dynamics that governed its development. From the very beginning, it was an emporium, a trading post, with commerce as its principal object, and even when it came to possess an inland plain as its territory, that plain, as Strabo’s description makes clear, was used to produce the raw materials from which items for export were fashioned.¹⁸ As best we can tell, then, the solvent responsible for the gradual amalgamation of the Indicetans and the Greek strangers in their midst was not compassion. It was the process of economic interchange that caused them to rub up against one another with great frequency, rendered them interdependent, and promoted an ethos of cooperation and a spirit of mutual respect.

Two millennia thereafter, in the wake of the Second World War, when Jean Monnet and his collaborators in Germany and France joined together to found the Common Market and did so in the hope of making future warfare between their nations unthinkable, they had something like the trajectory followed by ancient Emporion in mind. They were persuaded that it is commerce and the concomitant petty concern with one’s own material well-being that dissolve the fellow-feeling inspired by “anthropomorphized higher-order objects”; cause human beings to think, act, and see themselves first and foremost as individuals; and thereby promote the particular species of moral progress valued by Nusseibeh. The techniques associated with nonviolence that he describes with great enthusiasm in the last chapter of his latest book are not apt to have purchase and be in any way effective except in commercial societies, for it is only where individualism has already in considerable measure triumphed that human beings are apt to envisage members of other communities as women and men just like themselves—intent on making a living and deserving equal respect (pp. 194-224).

Of course, it may have been easier for the tolerant, ecumenical polytheists from Iberia and Hellas to learn to live and let live and eventually to intermarry, for the Protestants and Catholics in early and late modern

¹⁷ Strabo, *Geography, Books 3-5*, trans. Horace Leonard Jones (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1923), 3.4.8. Note also Livy, *History of Rome, Books 31-34*, trans. Evan T. Sage (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1935), 34.9. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁸ Strabo, *Geography*, 3.4.9.

Germany and France to do the like, and for the Christians and secularists of late twentieth-century France and those of Germany to bury the hatchet and follow suit than it would be for the adherents of Judaism and Islam to treat one another as equals within the contested territory of what both communities regard as sacred soil. Rival monotheistic religions of holy law do not easily a melting pot make. The Islamist wave now sweeping the Arab world may turn out to be a greater obstacle to the realization of Nusseibeh's dream than the Zionism of the Israeli Jews.

