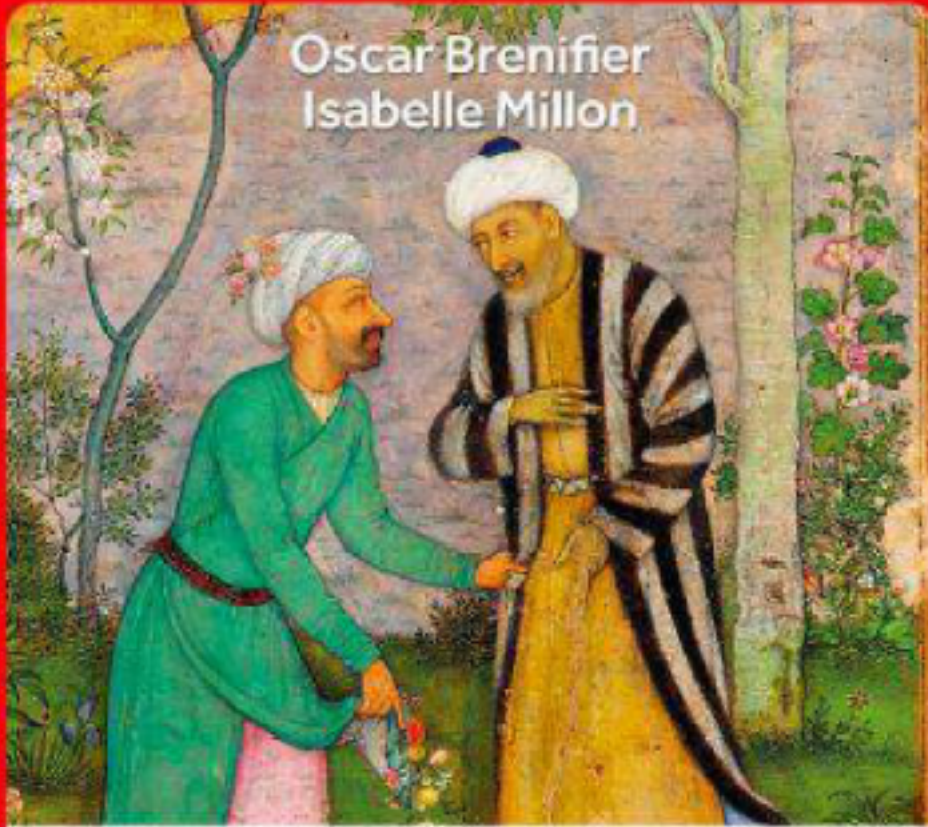


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WISDOM OF
SUFI TALES

Philosophical exercises

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Chapter 1 The long journey of Fatima

Is life a test?

ONCE UPON A TIME, THERE WAS A YOUNG WOMAN NAMED FATIMA, THE DAUGHTER OF A PROSPEROUS MERCHANT WHO LIVED IN MAGHREB. ONE DAY, THE FATHER WENT ON A BUSINESS TRIP WITH HER TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN.

– MAYBE YOU'LL FIND A GOOD SPOUSE, HE TOLD HER.

AFTER A FEW HAPPY STOPOVERS WHERE THE FATHER MADE SOME GOOD DEALS AND WHERE FATIMA DREAMT ABOUT HER FUTURE HUSBAND, THE SHIP WRECKED ON THE EGYPTIAN SHORE. THE FATHER DROWNED AND FATIMA FOUND HERSELF LOST IN A COMPLETE DESTITUTION. FORTUNATELY, A FAMILY OF POOR DRAPERS TOOK HER, ACCOMMODATED AND TAUGHT THE RUDIMENTS OF THEIR ART TO HER. AFTER A WHILE, SHE ENDED UP RECONCILING HERSELF WITH HER SPLIGHT.

ONE DAY, WHEN SHE WAS HAVING A WALK ALONGSIDE THE SHORE, SOME SLAVE TRADERS TOOK HER BY FORCE AND BROUGHT HER TO ISTANBUL. THEY TREATED HER HARSHLY AND THE POOR FATIMA WAS BITTERLY COMPLAINING ABOUT HER DOOM: SHE WAS UNFORTUNATE. WHEN SHE WAS EXPOSED IN THE MARKET, A MAST MAKER WHO WAS LOOKING FOR WORKERS HAD PITY FOR HER FEELING SO SAD. HE BOUGHT HER IN ORDER TO GIVE HER A SWEETER LIFE AS HIS WIFE'S SERVANT. BUT WHEN HE ARRIVED HOME, THE MAN LEARNED HE WAS RUINED BECAUSE OF SOME PIRATES WHO SEIZED HIS ONLY BOAT AS WELL AS ALL HIS CARGO. SINCE HE HAD NO MEANS FOR EMPLOYING WORKERS ANYMORE, HE STARTED BUILDING MASTS BY HIMSELF WITH THE HELP OF HIS WIFE AND FATIMA— HARD WORK. IN ORDER TO EXPRESS HER GRATITUDE, FATIMA WORKED LABORIOUSLY AND AFTER A WHILE, THEY ALL ACHIEVED PROSPERITY AGAIN. EVENTUALLY, THE OWNER FREED HER AND MADE HER HIS PARTNER, THUS SHE COULD FEEL A KIND OF HAPPINESS AGAIN.

ONE DAY, HE SENT FATIMA WITH A CARGO OF MASTS TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SEAS, IN ASIA, IN ORDER TO SELL THEM FOR A HIGHER PROFIT. BUT THE SHIP, CAUGHT IN A HURRICANE, WRECKED. FATIMA SWIMMED TO THE SHORE WITH DIFFICULTY. SHE WAS MOANING, THINKING HER LIFE WAS A PERMANENT DISASTER BECAUSE EVERY TIME SHE WAS HAPPY, ALL HER HOPES WERE BLASTED. "WHY DO I ALWAYS CONFRONT ADVERSITY?" SHE SAID, IN TEARS, LAYING ON THE GROUND. BUT, AS NO ONE ANSWERED, SHE STOOD UP AND STARTED WALKING FURTHER INLAND.

INADVERTENTLY, SHE HAD ARRIVED IN CHINA. FOR CENTURIES, A LEGEND HAD SPREAD THERE TELLING THAT SOME DAY A FOREIGN WOMAN WOULD ARRIVE AND WOULD BUILD A TENT FOR THE EMPEROR. IN THIS COUNTRY, NOBODY KNEW WHAT A TENT WAS OR HOW TO MAKE ONE. BUT THERE WAS ALWAYS A HOPE THAT THE PROPHECY WOULD COME TRUE. THEREFORE, AT THE BEGINNING OF EACH YEAR, SOME HERALDS COVERED THE REGION, ANNOUNCING IN ALL PLACES THAT ALL FOREIGN WOMEN THAT WOULD ARRIVE IN THE COUNTRY HAD TO BE LED TO THE PALACE. WHEN PEOPLE SAW FATIMA HAD ARRIVED IN THEIR TOWN, THEY TOLD HER THAT SHE HAD TO GO IMMEDIATELY TO THE COURT AND WENT WITH HER. IN FRONT OF THE EMPEROR, SHE WAS ASKED IF SHE KNEW HOW TO MAKE A TENT. SHE ANSWERED YES AND ASKED FOR ROPE. UNFORTUNATELY, THERE WAS NO ROPE. THEN, SHE REMEMBERED SHE WORKED AS A SPINNER: SO SHE PICKED UP LINEN AND STARTED MAKING ROPES. THEN SHE ASKED FOR CLOTH AND THERE WAS NONE. BUT SHE REMEMBERED THAT

SHE WORKED AS A WEAVER AND STARTED MAKING CLOTH. EVENTUALLY, SHE ASKED FOR SOME PEGS THAT DID NOT EXIST EITHER. BUT SHE REMEMBERED THAT SHE WORKED IN WOOD AND MADE SOME PEGS BY HERSELF. LATER, REMEMBERING VARIOUS TENTS SHE HAD SEEN AND LIVED IN, SHE MADE ONE.

AS THE EMPEROR SAW THE RESULT, HE WAS AMAZED. AS A REWARD, HE PROMISED FATIMA THAT HE WOULD GRANT ALL HER WISHES. SHE DECIDED TO MARRY A YOUNG PRINCE AND TO REMAIN IN CHINA, WHERE SHE HAD MANY CHILDREN AND LIVED HAPPILY FOR A LONG TIME.

Weaning

Fatima's story tends to sum up everyone's story. The name "Fatima" literally means "the child who has just been weaned". One could say that this is a story of weaning. At the beginning, everything goes well, just as it does for the child merging with his mother. The father is rich, he provides for all the needs. But like Odysseus, she discovers that finding her way is an adventure, full of surprises. Life is not a series of stages that follow one another naturally, predictably and according to our plans, but a series of more or less fortuitous events to which we must adapt, challenges that we must meet, adverse situations that we must fight. Accepting this reality and facing it can be called growing up.

The weaning from which Fatima takes her name corresponds to one of the first crises through which a small child goes, another form of cutting the umbilical cord. It is a separation from the womb, a term that means both the origin of a being and the environment in which he develops. It should be noted that nowhere is reference made to Fatima's mother: a detail that emphasizes the reality of this young woman's weaning. From the very beginning, she is looking for a husband, which shows that she is prepared to leave the family home; she no longer has a mother because she is preparing to become one herself. She aspires to her status as a woman, which implies separation from her own mother.

Quest

In Fatima, as in her father, there is a certain dissatisfaction, which is the source of a quest. This feeling, which is very human, takes different forms. On the one hand, the father wants to do more business. Indeed, it is in the nature of business, as in many others, to want more and more. The quest for fortune is perhaps one of the most obvious expressions of the insatiable human desire, together with the pursuit of glory and pleasure. It seems that any success in this field naturally leads to new, more intense and more extensive desires, at the risk of excessiveness. It is undoubtedly the latter that is punished, through this shipwreck from which the father would not return.

Being a "businessman" expresses man's common and banal nature: his materiality and his pursuit of tangible goods. One could find here the first degree of humanity. At the same time, the father, perhaps unconsciously, is driven by another quest. He wants to leave, to take risks by abandoning his roots, his home. Where to go? Towards the East, towards the distant horizon where the sun rises, towards the place where the light comes from, towards the original: a journey from the Far West to the Far East, which only his daughter will accomplish, in his stead. Because life, the quest represented by human existence, is not confined to the individual:

it is continuity and thus goes beyond its own finitude. This is probably why we instinctively reproduce ourselves. Also, under the disguise of a material quest, there is a spiritual desire. The metaphysical shadow lurks in all human acts and we cannot escape the double material and spiritual perspective, even if we are not aware of it.

Thus our man seeks to go towards the rising sun, towards the origin of light, even if it is to do business there. And he does not forget his daughter, since he does not exclude finding her a good husband in this excursion. What for her is the primary concern is only a secondary possibility for him: this is the generation gap. Despite the continuity of life and the generations that follow one another, there are still distinctions between singular beings. We therefore have three superimposed quests: the material, the spiritual and the existential quests, which together constitute the whole of what drives us, that is the quest for the world, the quest for transcendence and the quest for singularity.

Drama of existence

Let us now examine Fatima's behavior through her epic. First, she is a satisfied, dreamy, naive, romantic and hopeful young girl who is still unfamiliar with life. An attitude that she maintains until she experiences drama. But eventually it happens, tragically, as she loses everything she had: her peace, protection, wealth in a single event. She suddenly discovers loneliness and destitution, the reality of singular being, what can be called true weaning. Fatima finally deserves her name. Poor drapers, who live by the work of their hands, took her in. With them, she learns the world's harsh reality: the misery, the hardship, but also apprenticeship. This last point is very important, as we shall see, in the ending of the story. Fatima was a dependent, content and happy child, then a poor, helpless and suffering victim, now she is gaining power through work, which is a way of transforming her environment and supporting herself. As a result, she suffers less and learns to accept her lot— she is reconciled with reality, with the world and with herself.

Throughout her story, we observe an oscillation between these three emotional moments: first satisfaction, then anguish or despair, finally reconciliation— various moments linked to events and stages of life. When tragedy occurs, as in any difficult situation, for a relatively long period of time, we suffer and suffering prevents us from thinking and reacting adequately. Wisdom or fortitude precisely consists in going beyond this stage, in taking upon oneself, in going beyond the pain. In the course of learning, it is a question of reducing this time of latency, until it practically disappears, a regulating ideal that is certainly difficult to achieve. Through these various dramas, which constitute the human epic, our singular existence slowly takes shape.

Providence and Wisdom

As the narration progresses, the same cycle repeats: after each terrible moment, usually caused by fate, Fatima takes over again. We will notice on this point that what allows her to get out of it is a combination of factors: providence that renders favorable circumstances, meeting people of good will, as well as her own good will, manifested by her acceptance of living in destitution, by her ability to work in a difficult context, by her capacity for recognition and by her generosity. In the first instance, events, for better or for worse, are produced by a combination of fortuitous

elements (for example, the forces of nature) and external human elements (people acting against or according to morality). Fatima reacts to this in different ways, but her will and the good that arises from it generally prevail. It shows us that perseverance, patience and strength of character always triumph in the end. Until the "Chinese" conclusion of the story, which recapitulates the totality of her existence, retrospectively giving meaning and value to each of the moments she lived, giving her quite perfect happiness. It will be at the same time the technical skills learned in the work and the greatness of soul acquired by overcoming the tests that allow her to become herself, to realize herself, to become a woman, a mother, in other words, a "queen", an accomplished being. She completes the journey to the East that her father had inaugurated, without knowing that the encountered "fortune" is different from what he had expected.

It is interesting to note that just before the last adventure, which represents her final "victory" over fatality, is when Fatima despairs most. "Why do I always confront adversity?" she complains. The "always" seems to condemn her to a hopeless eternity as a suffering and helpless victim. But it is precisely at the edge of this abyss that her ultimate salvation lies. And her status as a foreigner, which makes her an outcast, also makes her a chosen one: the one who is able to accomplish what no one else can do. One might think of a feminine version of Rudyard Kipling's famous poem: "If you can see the work of your life destroyed and without saying a word, begin to build it again... Thou shalt be a man, my son!"

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- What does Fatima's father look for?
- What does Fatima expect from life?
- Why does work play such an important role in the story?
- What does Fatima learn over time?
- Why does Fatima's adventurous life come to an end?
- What does China represent in the story?
- Why does Fatima need a husband?
- Why are far away countries more promising?
- How does Fatima reconcile herself with her plight?
- What do all the shipwrecks represent in Fatima's life?

Reflection

- ★ Is work essential to life?
- ★ Is adversity useful?
- ★ Are we all the plaything of chance?
- ★ Is human being fundamentally alone?
- ★ Is life a painful hardship?
- ★ Must life have a goal?
- ★ Is fortitude an end or a means in life?

- ★ Is man an unsatisfied animal?
- ★ Does providence exist?
- ★ Why do men want to get richer?

Chapter 2 The Parrot

Are we prisoners of ourselves?

A MERCHANT HAD A PARROT, WHICH HE KEPT IN A LARGE CAGE. HE WAS DEAR TO HIM BECAUSE THE ANIMAL SPOKE WELL. ONE DAY, AS THE MERCHANT HAD TO GO TO INDIA, THE COUNTRY FROM WHICH THE BIRD WAS, HE ASKED THE ANIMAL WHAT WOULD BE THE GIFT HE WOULD LIKE THE MOST. THE PARROT REPLIED WITHOUT HESITATION:

- FREEDOM.

AS THE MAN REFUSED, THE PARROT SAID TO HIM:

- THEN GO INTO THE FOREST OUTSIDE OF TOWN AND WHEN YOU SEE PARROTS IN THE TREES, GIVE THEM NEWS FROM ME: TELL THEM WHAT HAPPENED, HOW I AM CONDEMNED TO LIVE IN A CAGE. ASK THEM TO THINK A LITTLE BIT ABOUT ME WHEN THEY CHEERFULLY FLY FROM TREE TO TREE.

ONCE IN INDIA, AFTER COMPLETING HIS BUSINESS, THE MAN WENT INTO THE FOREST AND FULFILLED WHAT HIS PARROT HAD REQUESTED. HARDLY HAD HE FINISHED SPEAKING WHEN A PARROT, VERY SIMILAR TO HIS, FELL TO THE GROUND, LIFELESS, AT THE FOOT OF THE TREE WHERE HE WAS PERCHED. THE MAN WAS UNHAPPY TO HAVE CAUSED THE DEATH OF THE BIRD AND TOLD HIMSELF THAT IT MUST HAVE BEEN A CLOSE RELATIVE OF HIS PARROT, SHOCKED BY THE SAD NEWS. WHEN HE WENT HOME, THE PARROT ASKED THE MERCHANT IF HE BROUGHT GOOD NEWS FROM ITS CONGENERS.

- ALAS NO! I'M AFRAID I ONLY HAVE PAINFUL WORDS FOR YOU. YOU SEE, AS YOU HAD REQUESTED, I WENT INTO THE FOREST IN ORDER TO CONVEY YOUR MESSAGE TO THE PARROTS THAT WERE THERE. BUT WHEN I MENTIONED YOUR CAPTIVITY, ONE OF YOUR CLOSE RELATIVES IMMEDIATELY COLLAPSED AT MY FEET. HE HAD SCARCELY UTTERED THESE WORDS THAT THE BIRD COLLAPSED TOO, AS STRUCK BY THE LIGHTNING, AT THE BOTTOM OF THE CAGE.

- THESE BIRDS ARE VERY SENSITIVE, THOUGHT THE MERCHANT, SURPRISED. THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF HIS BROTHER'S DEATH INSTANTLY KILLED HIM! SORRY TO LOSE THE ANIMAL TO WHICH HE WAS SO ATTACHED, THE MAN PICKED UP THE BIRD AND PLACED IT FOR THE MOMENT ON THE EDGE OF THE WINDOW. BUT RIGHT AWAY, THE BIRD SEEMED TO COME TO LIFE AND FLEW TO THE NEAREST BRANCH. FROM THERE, HE CALLED THE MAN TO EXPLAIN WHAT HAPPENED.

- WHAT YOU TOOK FOR AN UNFORTUNATE ANNOUNCEMENT WAS ACTUALLY GOOD NEWS: IT WAS SOUND ADVICE. THROUGH YOU, MY JAILER, I WAS SUGGESTED A STRATEGY TO ESCAPE MY SAD SITUATION AND SET MYSELF FREE. IN FACT, IT MADE ME UNDERSTAND THE REALITY OF MY SITUATION: "YOU ARE IN PRISON BECAUSE YOU SPEAK. DIE AND YOU WILL BE LIBERATED." AND THE PARROT FLED AWAY, FREE AT LAST.

Freedom

At the beginning of the story, the parrot asks the gift of freedom to his master who wanted to offer him a present. At that moment, he does not realize that this cannot be asked: freedom can only be given by oneself. The illusion that our lack of freedom would be caused by external constraints is a widespread phenomenon, along with the idea that liberation would therefore

come from the disappearance of these constraints. In such a logic, we are dependent on the goodwill of others, on transformations that we do not control, on the disappearance of obstacles that seem insurmountable. In his *Conversations*, Epictetus writes: "The things that depend on us are free by their nature, nothing can stop them, nor hinder them; those that do not depend on us are weak, slaves, dependent, subject to a thousand obstacles and drawbacks, and entirely out of us." Then he explains that man's misfortune comes precisely from not knowing how to distinguish them, from taking one for the other.

The story here specifies that the parrot does not even hesitate, which shows us how compulsive and unreasoned his request is. He does not think, he does not play, he is in survival, in pain, in need. And as a consolation, he asks his master to share his distress with his fellows. The latter agrees to be the messenger, back and forth, provoking "death" each time. He is saddened by this situation, which he does not understand, seeing it as an excess of sensitivity. Here, the words of Horace Walpole come to mind: "This world is a comedy for those who think, a tragedy for those who feel". It is precisely because the parrot starts to think, that he understands the farce that has been played to his master and that he can perform in turn, which allows him to recover his freedom. It is by acting, by taking distance with himself, that he finally gets the better of his master.

Speech

Speech is a more ambiguous term than it generally sounds. The term "freedom of speech" is easily used and "to prevent from speaking" seems to be a fundamental deprivation of freedom. Together with reason, speech seems to be the main prerogative of the human being. Through words, man builds, establishes, asserts his being. And as always in Sufi stories, the obvious is nonetheless questioned. Thus the hero of this story is a parrot: one of the few animals that speak like humans. Of course, it does not know what it says, it is deprived of conscience, of reason. In many cultures it is the symbol of a meaningless speech, where one only repeats the heard sounds. It is a semblance of speech, which says nothing. Too often, the one who speaks does not know what he is saying: he expresses himself, but does not think.

In this sense, speech can then be considered a prison: that of noise, of unconsciousness, of compulsion. And this is what the parrot must discover in order to finally regain his freedom. "You are in prison because you speak", he learned. He produces "noise" that is why his company is valued by humans. Anything is good for escaping silence, or for not being alone, in front of oneself. Whatever the content, the important thing is to be exhilarated by words. Silence costs us, the absence of reply from others is taken as lack of respect, even as aggression. It is a great sign of trust to be in the presence of others without talking to them, without being anxious, without taking this silence as indifference, coldness or rejection.

The parrot is in grievance, distress and discouragement: he is reduced to beg. Uncontrolled speech that only reinforces his powerlessness, his lack of being. Speech here is opposed to action, or reason, it is only a sham of meaning and existence: by inducing a certain complacency, it creates his own prison. Indeed, it would be better to learn to keep silent, so as not to listen to oneself, even if remaining silent seems to be equivalent to dying.

Dying

This story relates explicitly to the concept of dying to oneself, which is fundamental in Sufi thinking. As we have seen, the parrot is a prisoner of his own speech. In order to free himself from this state of things, he must die to himself, as indicated by his relative in the forest. Of course, he does not really die, "it's only theatre", one could say, "something the animal uses to trick his master". But what constitutes this objection is precisely the essence of this "dying to oneself". "Whoever teaches men to die teaches them to live", wrote Montaigne, in keeping with the ancient tradition, whether Platonic or Stoic. But this does not mean that the point is merely to be ready for the "final moment". It means learning to let go, that is to say, to give up control, to stop wanting our "own good" all the time. It means trusting, it means giving up the immediate and compulsive pursuit of what is dear to our hearts, it means contemplating our own existence from a distance, it means no longer seeking to ensure our own happiness as a condition for being content, it means detaching ourselves from our most ardent desires and our deepest fears. We must be there without being there, as a condition for being there. There is a famous hadîth (passage from the Qur'an) which says: "Be in this world like an immigrant, or a passenger, consider yourself among the people of the tombs." Our presence in this world is only a formality, in essence we live in the other world, if our virtue allows us to do so.

So the parrot, through the concept of "death", realizes that being too obsessed with his status of prisoner crying over his plight, he no longer knows how to escape it. To free himself, he must alienate himself, that is to say, escape his sincerity, feelings, existential urgency; actually the role of "death" represents a *mise en abyme* of his immediate being.

Exile and Origin

When we are introduced to the parrot at the beginning of the story, we learn on the one hand that he is a prisoner, but on the other hand that he is in exile, very far from home since his origins are in India, the mythical East, which is here the symbol of an inaugural paradise. It is from this remote place that he will receive the message or the teaching that is necessary for his liberation. This echoes certain concepts of German idealism, like in Hölderlin's work. We find in the latter a very strong relationship to the symbolic of myth, with the concept of return to the origin. The origin is an archetype: it represents the place of the archaic, of chaos, of the divine, a kind of foundation or rich, innocent and unconscious totality, to which the mind can or must turn to and plunge into, in order to discover hidden truths. Hegel uses the same intuition to bring the being from an implicit and poor existence to the fullness of act, allowing the implementation of the mind's potentialities, which constitutes the means of a historical becoming through an explicit relation to the Absolute: the *urgrung*, the deep cause, the foundation. The parrot accomplishes himself existentially by meeting again the metaphysical absolute.

The forest, mysterious and dense, is the place from which the coded message returns, carried by a messenger who is unaware of its real content. Only the one who is "ready" will be able to grasp its profound meaning, which seems to be the case for our parrot, but not for the master. When the man goes into the forest, as foretold, he meets parrots. In this mysterious place is the answer, which resembles the archaic origin described by Hölderlin. One can see here a kind

of depersonalized oracle, whether animal or sylvan. And like in any teaching of this kind, one can only detect what one is able to find there: everyone is sent back to himself. In this sense, teaching is invisible, learning is indirect. No specific morality is offered, no thinking system, but something that echoes the totality of the experience. Hence the parrot understands that he is in fact a prisoner of himself and his function. He detects meaning where the master only finds facts. Strangely, the bird seems to be more prepared than the man to grasp the reality of the world. Probably because the first knows that he is captive, while the second thinks that he is free, even though he is as well a prisoner of his function: as a merchant, he knows only material realities. For him, the bird is only an object, a commodity. One can imagine his stupor at the conclusion of the story: he is the real exiled. No doubt that we, readers, resemble the merchant more than the parrot.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Does the merchant keep his parrot because he loves him?
- Why does the man obey the parrot?
- Did the parrot suspect the consequences of his request?
- What is the difference between the diverse parrots in the story?
- What could the merchant's journey symbolize?
- Why does the parrot understand "the story" better than the merchant?
- What did the parrot learn in this story?
- What does the "faked death" represent in this story?
- Why is a parrot the hero of this story?
- Could the parrot have acted on its own?

Reflection

- ★ Are we prisoners of our own word?
- ★ What are the main reasons for which we speak?
- ★ Are we aware of the nature and consequences of our words?
- ★ Why is silence sometimes painful?
- ★ Can death be a necessity?
- ★ Why do some people understand and some others do not?
- ★ Are we born free or do we become free?
- ★ Do others prevent us from being free?
- ★ Do we have to lie to be free?
- ★ In what way is the human being always in exile?

Chapter 3 The pomegranates

Is knowledge a form of power?

ONCE, THERE WAS A YOUNG MAN WHO WAS STUDYING MEDICINE WITH A SUFI MASTER, WHO WAS ALSO A DOCTOR. AFTER A FEW YEARS UNDER HIS TUTELAGE, HE ASKED HIM: "MASTER, WHEN THE NEXT PATIENT COMES, LET ME, I BEG YOU, TAKE CARE OF HIM. I WANT TO PROVE MYSELF!"

– I DON'T THINK YOU'RE READY YET, REPLIED THE MASTER, BUT LET'S DO AN EXPERIMENT. I'LL LET YOU DO AND WE'LL SEE WHAT HAPPENS. SHORTLY AFTER, THEY WERE SITTING BEFORE THE HOUSE, WHEN A MAN ARRIVED. THE TEACHER IMMEDIATELY SAID TO THE DISCIPLE:

– THIS MAN IS VISIBLY ILL.

THE STUDENT LOOKED AT HIS MASTER, SURPRISED.

– HOW DO YOU KNOW?

– LOOK AT HIS FACE AND THE COLOR OF HIS SKIN, CONTINUED THE MASTER. HE NEEDS A DIET OF POMEGRANATES.

WHEN THE MAN WAS CLOSER TO THEM, THE STUDENT STOOD UP AND APPROACHED HIM WITH THESE WORDS: "YOU'RE SICK!"

– OH YES! REPLIED THE OTHER. I ALREADY KNEW THIS! WHY DO YOU THINK I CAME TO SEE THE DOCTOR?

– YOU NEED TO EAT POMEGRANATES, ORDERED THE YOUNG MAN.

THE MAN EXPRESSED SURPRISE.

– POMEGRANATES! AND WHY POMEGRANATES? THAT'S ALL? FOR WEEKS, I HAVE NOT BEEN FEELING GOOD!

AND HE WENT AWAY, DISAPPOINTED. THE YOUNG MAN TURNED TO THE MASTER:

– WHAT IS WRONG? WHAT HAVE I DONE WRONG?

THE MASTER SMILED SOFTLY.

– WAIT FOR A SIMILAR SITUATION AND I WILL SHOW YOU.

THE NEXT DAY, THEY WERE BOTH SITTING ON THE DOORSTEP, WHEN ANOTHER MAN CAME TOWARDS THEM.

– LET ME DO IT. YOU'LL UNDERSTAND THE PROBLEM, SAID THE MASTER, BECAUSE THIS MAN NEEDS POMEGRANATES TOO.

THE DOCTOR INVITED THE SICK MAN TO ENTER AND SAT HIM DOWN. HE ORDERED HIM TO UNDRESS AND OBSERVED HIM LENGTHILY. THEN, HE ASKED HIM SEVERAL QUESTIONS, MORE OR LESS INSIGNIFICANT.

– OH, I SEE... YOUR CASE IS VERY INTERESTING AND RARE INDEED! AND I SEE THAT YOU SUFFER. WAIT A MINUTE, LET ME THINK ... WHAT IS RECOMMENDED IN SUCH A CASE, IS A NATURAL REMEDY OF COURSE. HOLD ON! A FRUIT, PERHAPS... WITH MANY SEEDS... LEMON? NO, IT MAY BE TOO ACIDIC FOR YOU AND BAD FOR YOUR STOMACH. LET'S SEE... AH! I KNOW! POMEGRANATES. THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT YOU NEED! POMEGRANATES...

THE DOCTOR WATCHED AT THE SAME TIME HIS CLIENT INTENSIVELY, AS IF HE HAD MADE A GREAT DISCOVERY. THE PATIENT, REASSURED, EXPRESSED HIS GRATITUDE, PAID THE DOCTOR AND WENT HOME, VERY HAPPY. THE YOUNG MAN, IRRITATED, SAID:

– I DON'T UNDERSTAND! I SEE NO DIFFERENCE. THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT I SAID YESTERDAY

TO THE OTHER PATIENT: YOU NEED POMEGRANATES!

– SURE. BUT YOU SEE, THESE TWO MEN, EVEN MORE THAN POMEGRANATES, NEEDED TIME.

Knowledge and power

Knowledge is power. This may explain why the apprentice doctor in this story is eager to get on with the science he has been studying for a certain time. Rather than deepening what he already knows by observing his master, he wants to exercise his power. He is less concerned with the patient's well-being, who would be better off consulting the most competent person, than with doing as he pleases, which also poses an ethical problem for his status as a doctor.

Of course, one might object that he wants to learn by practicing, but the feverish side of his behavior, to which his master objects, shows that he is driven by a somewhat infantile impulse. On the contrary, his master, although he thinks that it is too early and that his apprentice is not ready yet, lets him do. He trusts the principle of reality: the apprentice will learn by himself by observing what happens, by suffering the consequences of his actions. Even more than through technical knowledge of medicine, it is through his confident and patient attitude that the doctor demonstrates his art. True power is not exercised directly, but by knowing and using the natural processes of the world, what the Sufis call "internal workings" that weave reality.

The young man is in a hurry, this is shown by his behavior towards the patient. Immediately, without taking the time for anything else, he hits him with "the truth". He decrees, in order to show what he knows and, of course, who he is. He is "the one who knows". The scientist has a beautiful image, the ignorant a mediocre one. But the advantage of experimental knowledge, like a doctor's, is that it does not remain merely a subjective opinion: it is verified through acts and their consequences.

Being right

We are discovering that "truth" cannot be manipulated without any caution. Truth is harsh, raw and cruel, it is a sharp and burning instrument, which we must learn to know, tame and manipulate, in order to allow ourselves to be worked by it as a first condition for its use. It is easy to talk openly to others, but much less easy to hear what the other person is saying. This is what happens to our apprentice doctor, who is in a hurry both to tell the patient that he is ill and to order him what he must do. The latter reacts with one of the many strategies known to human beings to avoid the pain caused by the truth. First of all, he retorts to the young man's harshness with the classic: "I already knew it." He may have already known it, but he could have answered "indeed" or "you're right" which would have been less aggressive or demanding. We can see that his unpleasant and worrying situation as a sick person, combined with the lack of sensitivity of the "doctor", provokes a strong reaction that is a simple defense mechanism. Moreover, to show also that he "knows" and that he holds power, he tries to give the young man a lesson of logic, by showing him that his words are obvious: "Why do you think I came to see the doctor?"

Still unconsciously in the quest for power, which mainly involves asserting oneself and knowledge, the apprentice makes a second categorical and preemptory statement: "You need

to eat pomegranates." Of course, the "patient", who already is reluctant to accept this lack of recognition of his individuality, reacts rather badly again to this unkind "truth" and the stiff "you need to". Quite disappointed and lacking confidence, he is reluctant and questions the validity of such a prescription, which though seems too banal and does not honor the specificity and extent of his suffering, therefore of his being. The attentive observer will also notice the ostentation with which some patients carry and highlight their pathologies. On the contrary, some will hide their illness, which seems to deprive them of the image they would like to give themselves.

Still, the fact remains that our man takes with the greatest disdain the prescription so graciously offered to him. And our apprentice is left amazed by the very negative reception of this truth, which, on the one hand, is an unshakable certitude for him, on the other hand, embodies his power. Why would an "ignorant" refuse in such a cavalier manner the lights of science? He does not understand and questions his master on this subject, who cannot help smiling at such naivety. After all, does his apprentice not suffer from the same pathology as the disappointed patient? Rejection of truth is too harsh to be accepted: one prefers to be right.

Patience and trust

Rather than explaining in words, which could be useless and lead only to a doubtful reaction or strong denials on the part of his apprentice, the master prefers to make a demonstration.

So what is the difference when the patient consults the time after and is happy with an identical prescription? "Time" answers the master to his perplexed and annoyed student. It is about psychological time, the rhythm of some unconscious process that operates in the mind of the patient. First of all, the doctor plays the role of a thinker who admires the disease, which gives value to the phenomenon: challenging, interesting and rare. Secondly, he expresses empathy, compassion, in this way accompanying the patient. Finally, he praises the medicine. He presents the prescription both as the result of a process of reflection and as an effort to do the best for the person. He welcomes the patient in his joy of discovery, adding gestures and looks to his words, to ensure the consent of the interlocutor.

Of course, one could accuse the doctor of practicing rhetoric, of being in a manipulative or seductive scheme, it would not be false. But in the same way, one could say of him that he is a pedagogue: that is to say, he is concerned about the person in front of him, as well as the effect that his words can have, in order to be effective.

It is indeed a matter of impressing or persuading others through behavior and language. This is what the young man, proud of his science, does not understand; he does not realize that he has a real person in front of him, whom he needs to take care of, with the appropriate precautions. Truth cannot impose itself brutally, otherwise it does not work. Efficiency is, moreover, one of the important forms of truth, as we know in science, through experimentation. In a "pedagogical" framework, where efficiency is based on understanding and caring for others, one does not say his "knowledge", one seeks to act for the best, which implies not being driven by the impulse of "sincerity". It is therefore a question of lying, by omission or commission, in determining what is said mainly for the sake of efficiency. At this point, a distancing from oneself must take place, in order to focus on others, which implies a form of asceticism.

Thus, the young man is annoyed not to know, nor even to understand what it is all about.

Besides, discovering that his knowledge is not in itself a power, he is still missing something, which is terribly frustrating. He can only repeat, obsessively and stupidly, like dazed: "This is exactly what I said yesterday..." He thus shows to the reader the slow work of the mind that remains to be done. And when the doctor explains the situation by saying, "those two men needed time", he is also talking about his apprentice. The condition of power, he shows, is to abandon it, or at least not to try to show it, nervously and hastily, so much as to defer one's action in time, which both requires and generates confidence.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why does the young man want to prove himself?
- How does the doctor know that his student was not ready?
- What is the main mistake of the young man?
- Why is the first patient disappointed?
- Why is the second patient satisfied?
- Why is the student annoyed?
- Why does the student have difficulty understanding what happened?
- What does "need for time" mean?
- Is the doctor a smooth-talker?
- What does the doctor know that his student does not know?

Reflection

- ★ Why is patience important?
- ★ Must we lie to convey the truth?
- ★ Why does truth need time?
- ★ Do we all need to believe that we are special?
- ★ Are we all in the quest of an identity?
- ★ Why do we want to show our knowledge?
- ★ Is knowledge necessarily power?
- ★ Does the end justify the means?
- ★ Is it moral to lie in order to get what we want?
- ★ Is manipulation a good thing?
- ★ Is it always good to be sincere?

Are our convictions our own?

THERE WAS ONCE A SCHOOLTEACHER WHO WAS VERY DEMANDING AND SEVERE WITH HIS STUDENTS. THEY NEVER TOLD HIM ANYTHING BECAUSE HE FRIGHTENED THEM. LOOK OUT FOR THOSE WHO DID NOT LEARN THEIR LESSONS BY HEART! BUT ONE DAY, TIRED OF HIS EXCESSIVE AUTHORITY, THE PUPILS DECIDED TO FIND A SOLUTION TO GET RID OF HIM.

– WHAT A PITY, SAID ONE OF THEM, HE NEVER GETS SICK! THAT WOULD GIVE US SOME RESPITE.

– YES, SAID ANOTHER, WE WOULD BE FREE, AT LEAST OCCASIONALLY.

HEARING THIS, A THIRD STUDENT PROPOSED AN IDEA:

– WE COULD TRY TO CONVINCHE HIM THAT HE'S SICK. IT WOULD BE ENOUGH TO SAY, "TEACHER! YOUR FACE IS REALLY PALE THIS MORNING! YOU MUSTN'T BE WELL, NO DOUBT THAT YOU'VE FEVER."

– IF YOU TELL HIM THAT, HE WILL NOT BELIEVE YOU, A FOURTH OBJECTED. YOUR WORDS WILL NOT MANAGE TO CONVINCHE HIM. BUT IF ALL OF US, ONE AFTER THE OTHER, REPEAT THE SAME THING, HE WILL EVENTUALLY BELIEVE IT. RIGHT AFTER YOU, I WILL TELL HIM: "WHAT'S GOING ON, MASTER? WHAT'S HAPPENING TO YOU?" IF WE'RE SINCERE, BY DINT OF REPEATING IT, HE'LL BE CONVINCED FOR SURE.

THE NEXT MORNING, THE STUDENTS WOULD PREPARE THEIR TRAP. HARDLY HAD THE MASTER ARRIVED, INSTEAD OF THE USUAL SALUTE, A FIRST PUPIL, SIMULATING A SORROWFUL AIR, ANNOUNCED THE "BAD NEWS" TO HIM. THE MASTER, IRRITATED BY HIS REMARK, SENT HIM AWAY WITH AN ABRUPT MOVEMENT OF THE HAND:

– DON'T SAY SILLY THINGS! I'M NOT SICK. GO TO YOUR PLACE AND SIT DOWN. AS PLANNED, DIFFERENT CHILDREN, ONE AFTER THE OTHER, SHARED THEIR "CONCERN", EACH ONE WITH THEIR OWN WORDS. THE MASTER GRADUALLY BEGAN TO WONDER, THEN ENDED UP BELIEVING THAT HE WAS REALLY SICK, SO MUCH THAT HE STARTED NOT TO FEEL WELL AT ALL. HE FINALLY DECIDED TO GO HOME, TO TREAT HIMSELF. BUT ON HIS WAY HOME, HE FELT RESENTFUL TOWARDS HIS WIFE.

– HOW COME THAT SHE DIDN'T EVEN NOTICE MY CONDITION THIS MORNING? ISN'T SHE INTERESTED IN ME ANYMORE? WOULD SHE LEAVE ME TO MARRY ANOTHER?

WHEN HE OPENED THE DOOR OF THE HOUSE, SITUATED CLOSE TO THE SCHOOL, HE WAS VERY ANGRY. HIS WIFE, SURPRISED TO SEE HIM BACK SO SOON, ASKED HIM:

– WHAT'S GOING ON? WHY AREN'T YOU AT SCHOOL?

– DON'T YOU SEE THE PALLOR OF MY FACE? REPLIED THE SCHOOLTEACHER WITH A HARSH TONE. EVERYONE'S CONCERNED ABOUT MY HEALTH, BUT YOU REMAIN COMPLETELY INDIFFERENT. KNOWING THAT WE SHARE THE SAME ROOF, BUT YOU DON'T EVEN WORRY ABOUT ME!

HIS WIFE REPLIED: "MY DEAR HUSBAND, YOU IMAGINE THINGS. YOU AREN'T SICKER THAN ME. WHERE DID YOU GET THIS FAD?"

THE MASTER CLEARLY LOST HIS TEMPER:

– O FOOLISH WOMAN, YOU'RE COMPLETELY BLIND. CAN'T YOU SEE I'M SICK, I DON'T FEEL GOOD AND I HURT EVERYWHERE!

BUT THE WOMAN REPLIED FIRMLY:

– AS YOU WISH. BUT LET ME BRING YOU A MIRROR. YOU’LL CHECK BY YOURSELF IF YOU REALLY LOOK SICK AND YOU’LL SEE IF I DESERVE TO BE TREATED IN SUCH AN UNFAIR MANNER.

– LEAVE ME AT PEACE WITH YOUR MIRROR! GO AND PREPARE MY BED INSTEAD, MAYBE I’LL FEEL BETTER IF I LIE DOWN. AND RUN QUICKLY TO THE DOCTOR.

MUMBLING, THE WOMAN HEADED TOWARDS THE ROOM.

– ALL THIS MAKES NO SENSE. HE PRETENDS TO BE SICK AND GETS ME AWAY FROM HOME. I DON’T KNOW WHAT HE WANTS, BUT I’M SURE IT’S AN EXCUSE.

ONCE IN BED, THE MASTER BEGAN TO MOAN. THE PUPILS HEARD HIM THROUGH THE WINDOW AND THE TRICKY ONE WHO HAD THIS "GOOD" IDEA SUGGESTED TO THE OTHERS:

– LET’S READ OUR LESSONS WITH THE LOUDEST POSSIBLE VOICE, ALL TOGETHER, AS HE ISN’T IN A GOOD MOOD, THE NOISE WILL CERTAINLY ANNOY HIM.

INDEED, AFTER A TIME, THE MASTER WAS TIRED OF THE NOISE, DESPITE HIS "SICKNESS" HE GOT UP AND TOLD HIS STUDENTS:

– YOU GIVE ME A HEADACHE. THERE WON’T BE ANY CLASS TODAY. I AUTHORIZE YOU TO GO HOME.

POLITELY, THE CHILDREN WISHED HIM A QUICK RECOVERY AND WENT OFF.

WHEN THE MOTHERS SAW THEIR CHILDREN PLAYING IN THE STREETS INSTEAD OF BEING AT SCHOOL, THEY SEVERELY REPRIMANDED THEM. AND THE CHILDREN DEFENDED THEMSELVES:

– THE MASTER TOLD US TO LEAVE! IT’S NOT OUR FAULT IF BY THE WILL OF GOD, HE FELL ILL.

THE MOTHERS THREATENED THEM:

– WE’LL SEE IF YOU TELL THE TRUTH. IF IT’S A LIE, THEN BEWARE!

THEY WENT IMMEDIATELY TO THE SCHOOLMASTER’S HOUSE, WHERE THEY FOUND THAT HE WAS SERIOUSLY ILL, ACCORDING TO HIM.

THEY APOLOGIZED FOR DISTURBING:

– EXCUSE US, WE DIDN’T KNOW YOU WERE SICK.

– NEITHER DID I. I HAD NO CLUE! REPLIED THE MASTER. YOUR CHILDREN ALERTED ME!

Barbarians and savages

Friedrich Schiller calls certain characters barbarians, whom he opposes to savages. The first are those who always want to dictate rules, to impose a priori and categorically defined forms, without caring about individualities, differences, plurality, sensibility and the way of being of everyone. The savages, on the contrary, only know their immediate impulses, their desires and their subjectivity, without worrying about any universality or of any duty. For the first ones, reality is articulated through pre-established rules, for the latter, through the impulses of the moment. The schoolmaster of this story obviously falls into the first category, the pupils rather into the second category. But in both cases, neither pity nor compassion find their place. In fact, the two schemes refer to each other.

The master knows he thinks that all must know, he imposes this knowledge through specific forms, in particular repetition, which implies learning by pure memorization, a formal system coupled, according to tradition, with a punitive system. No wonder students are frustrated and even angry. This barbarity sends them back to their own savagery. Thus they feel oppressed, unable to breathe, of not being able to exist. A problem in fact quite common, both in parents

or teachers' way of being and in the experience of pupils. At this point, everything is good to fight "oppression". The whole problem, for the savage as for the barbarian, is to know how to combine freedom and obligation.

Personal opinion and common opinion

We all have more or less well-founded opinions, personal beliefs, which serve as points of reference and guide us from day to day. Some are more well-founded, or more anchored than others and during our existence we see them changing, disappearing, sometimes reappearing. Of course, time has a lot to do with it, as a kind of natural evolution linked to age and to the internal modifications of our being. But the events that we go through, the various circumstances which constitute the environment that we live in, the relations and common opinion's transformations also play a role. This is the principle that the pupils of the school understood and put into practice. They use the power of words to change their teacher and to defeat this man who is so hard and inflexible that he never gets sick. If an opinion cannot convince him, the repetition of it should affect him.

Thus, no one is safe from the common opinion. This is fortunate, because it protects us from our own rigidities and solipsism; but this is unfortunate, because it shows how the desire for recognition or other phenomena of osmosis make us influenceable or corruptible. However, this relation to the group is a necessity. Then, it is quite an art to know how to keep one's certitudes and to abandon them. To believe or not to believe, that is the question. We can also ask ourselves where our intimate convictions come from.

Doubt

Doubt dwells in the heart of man, it nestles in the depths of what represents his identity: thinking. To such an extent that Descartes took doubt as the foundation or the principal guarantee of our own existence, to know indubitably that we exist: "I doubt therefore I am." Certainly a paradox: the doubt would thus allow us not to doubt our being. The doubt expresses uncertainty, lack of conviction, in this sense it hardly pleases us, because we like to be certain, which reassures us. But it also allows us to go further, to see our errors, to progress in our thoughts.

In the present story, the doubt of the master is nothing but rational: it is provoked by anxiety and shows the fragility of this apparently rational and firm-minded man. It is periodically the case with anxious people, who hide their own doubts behind an excessive stubbornness and an apparent willpower, but who in fact simply find it difficult to make well-considered judgments. Therefore, they oscillate between erratic behavior and stubborn attitude, by fear of facing their own incertitudes. Thus the master, after having refused, then doubted, completely clings to the idea of his illness.

Mistrust

Once we have an idea in mind, some kind of conviction, the totality of reality must conform to it *nolens volens*. Rejection and mistrust settle in towards everything that does not fit to these conclusions, to the principles thus elaborated, to this vision of the world. And as we often do not wish to change our minds, we try to "adapt" the realities that are in our way, in order to preserve and nourish the perspective we have elected. The twists that we then make on the

perception of what surrounds us can be particularly violent. Very often, we prefer to ignore what does not suit us: we reject, ignore, forget it. But we can also tackle it and attack it, for example by attributing bad intentions to it and by letting our fears express themselves. This is what happens to the schoolmaster, who, because of his new "revelation", comes to doubt his wife. And when she wants to summon the reality of the mirror, he refuses completely, because he no longer listens to her: any trust is lost. He wants pity, emotion, but denies reason; he accepts weakness, but bounces strength.

Of course, this type of mistrust is very contagious, the wife also starts to imagine malignant intentions where there is only stupidity and stubbornness. But for convenience, we often prefer to mistrust others much more than ourselves. But it is easy to arouse mistrust: it is only a matter of awakening the suspicions and fears that are always present and slumbering in the heart of man. Like the animal, we are constantly oscillating between desire and fear. Finally, how can we trust ourselves, others or reason? Perhaps it all depends on our generosity, which is hardly apparent in everyday life, as the various characters in the narration clearly show it.

Authority and reality

Who has the power to determine reality? Often, it nestles in the words of others. The end of the story tells us that the teacher did not know he was sick, that he learned it from the children and we can think that the mothers who question him, willingly adhere to the teacher's assertion, although they are somewhat surprised. They doubt their children, but if the authority, which this man represents, says they are right, then the mothers believe them. Unlike the wife, who is more suspicious, because she knows the subjectivity of the authority.

We have here a very interesting game of criss-crossing. The children rebel against the authority that they find abusive and they manage to manipulate it and make it doubt itself. But the mothers, who also represent a form of authority for children and doubt their children's word, are likely to accept their offspring's authority because the teacher, manipulated, asserts that they are right.

When claims contradict each other, we must ultimately determine whom we trust, to whom we attribute the authority of knowledge and truth. Without realizing it, we sometimes adhere to certain speeches without any other expectation of proof than the credibility we give to a person, often in an arbitrary and irrational manner. This story shows us that school is the place par excellence where we learn to accept the argument of authority without discussion unless we are careful to do so.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- What is the relationship between the teacher and his pupils?
- What is similar between the teacher and his pupils?
- Why does the teacher end up believing the pupils?
- Why is the teacher angry with his wife?
- Why does the teacher believe the pupils rather than his wife?
- Is the teacher reasonable?

- Why does the teacher not want to see the mirror?
- Do the characters of this story trust others?
- Is the teacher really sick?
- Why do the mothers believe the teacher and not their children?

Reflection

- ★ Does school embody a form of alienation?
- ★ Is authority essential for a teacher?
- ★ Why should we believe the group more than just one person?
- ★ Is repetition a good way to convey a message?
- ★ Is fear an effective technique to convey a message?
- ★ Should we rather believe in others or oneself?
- ★ Why do we sometimes prefer to trust our convictions rather than the obvious?
- ★ Why is authority a guarantee of credibility?
- ★ Why do parents often have difficulty believing their children?
- ★ Are stubborn people strong or weak?

Should we always tell the truth?

ONE DAY A MAN CAME HOME UNEXPECTEDLY FROM WORK. IT WAS NOT HIS HABIT TO LEAVE THE SHOP SO EARLY, BUT THE IDEA CAME TO HIM WITH A KIND OF FOREBODING. SO HE DECIDED TO ARRIVE BY SURPRISE AT A RATHER UNUSUAL TIME. BUT HIS WIFE, UNFAITHFUL, WAS RECEIVING ANOTHER MAN. WHEN HE ARRIVED, HE COULD NOT OPEN THE DOOR. SO HE KNOCKED LOUDLY AND CALLED HIS WIFE. OF COURSE, CERTAIN THAT HER HUSBAND WOULD NOT SHOW UP AT THIS TIME, RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DAY, THE WIFE WAS TAKEN ABACK. SHE DID NOT KNOW WHAT TO DO. THEIR SMALL FAMILY HOUSE OFFERED NO OTHER EXIT THAN THE MAIN DOOR AND NO PLACE TO HIDE. NO CORNER OR RECESS ALLOWED HIDING THE PRESENCE OF A MAN. IN DESPERATION, SHE DECIDED TO RAPIDLY DISGUISE HER GUEST INTO A WOMAN, USING HER OWN CLOTHING AND VEIL THEN SHE OPENED THE DOOR TO HER HUSBAND. DRESSED IN THIS WAY, THE MAN WAS AS VISIBLE AND GROTESQUE AS A CAMEL IN A STAIRCASE, BUT THE HUSBAND WITHHELD ANY COMMENT. HE SIMPLY ASKED HIS WIFE:

- WHO IS THIS PERSON WITH A HIDDEN FACE?
- THIS IS A WOMAN KNOWN IN TOWN FOR HER PIETY AND HER WEALTH, SHE ANSWERED.
- AND WHAT CAN WE DO FOR HER? IS SHE ASKING FOR A FAVOR?
- SHE WANTS TO BECOME OUR IN-LAW. SHE HAS HEARD MANY GOOD THINGS ABOUT OUR DAUGHTER AND SHE WOULD LIKE HER AS A SPOUSE FOR HER SON. THIS WOMAN HAS A PURE AND NOBLE HEART. SHE AFFIRMS THAT, BEAUTIFUL OR NOT, SHE WANTS HER AS A DAUGHTER. YOU MUST KNOW THAT HER SON IS INCOMPARABLE BY ITS NATURE, ITS BEAUTY AND INTELLIGENCE.
- WE ARE POOR PEOPLE AND THIS WOMAN IS RICH. SUCH A MARRIAGE WOULD BE LIKE A GARMENT HALF SILK AND HALF LINEN: IT WOULD SHAME THE WEARER.
- THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT I TOLD HER. BUT SHE SAID THAT SHE DOESN'T CARE: SHE IS NOT INTERESTED IN WEALTH, OR IN NOBILITY SHE DOESN'T WORRY ABOUT WHAT OTHERS THINK. SHE ONLY WANTS TO RELATE TO HONEST PEOPLE.

THE HUSBAND STILL RAISED VARIOUS ARGUMENTS, BUT HIS WIFE CLAIMED TO HAVE ALREADY RAISED ALL OF THEM, STATING THAT THE WOMAN WAS NOT CONCERNED WITH ALL THIS. SHE REPEATED PERIODICALLY:

- SHE DOESN'T FEAR POVERTY, WHAT SHE STRONGLY APPRECIATES IN US IS OUR HONESTY.
- THIS WOMAN MUST REALIZE THAT OUR HOUSE IS SO SMALL THAT WE COULD NOT EVEN HIDE A NEEDLE IN IT! SHE CAN THEREFORE GUESS THAT OUR DAUGHTER HAS NO DOWRY. AS FOR OUR HONESTY AND DIGNITY, IT IS CERTAIN THAT THEY ARE CLEARLY VISIBLE. NEVERTHELESS, IT WILL BE AS YOU WISH, HE SAID TO HIS WIFE BEFORE RETURNING TO HIS SHOP.

Trust

Trust is a feeling of security or certainty about someone or something. It can also be called an act of faith. It is the opposite of fear, doubt and uncertainty. We can indeed count on this person or this thing, for a given behavior, for a specific action or function. We can therefore recognize a certain form of predictability. Nevertheless, we can distinguish trust from knowledge and

knowing, in the fact that there is still a certain amount of unpredictability, a simple possibility of failure. That is why knowledge does not tolerate any proof of the contrary, which must be taken on immediately, or else this knowledge is obliged to forfeit, to be modified or abandoned. On the contrary, confidence is measured by its capacity to accept what contradicts its certainty. In this sense, trust has something less than knowledge, concerning the objectivity of its content, but has something more on the level of subjectivity: a strength that allows it not to become confused by the "objectivity" of the obvious.

Of course, trust is not totally deaf, nor blind, even if it tends to be so: it accepts to be challenged by doubt from time to time. Contrary to what one might think at first, the confidence that we have is measured by our own capacity to accept what objectively would constitute for another person a reason for mistrust. In other words, like love, trust is not a matter of rationality, it is often even of its opposite.

So it is with the hero of our story. A vague presentiment makes him return home. Everything that happens afterwards should be enough to diminish or lose this trust that inhabits him. But he decides, consciously or not, to preserve it. He cares less about reality than about the sweet, quiet peace of mind that comes with trust. The observer may find him naive or cowardly, but perhaps this is a form of wisdom.

Lie

Lying is a conscious denial of reality. But it is costly, in time and effort. Once pronounced, it is then a question of nourishing this distorted description of reality, up to the point of impossibility and absurdity even beyond, in cases that border on the pathological. This claim of an "other" reality has terrible requirements, since it is a matter of fabricating truth. One lies to protect himself, from himself or from others, to obtain or not lose something. It is always a manipulation, of the world and of others, which at any moment could collapse.

So it is with the heroine of our story. She begins by posing a strong gesture, very symbolic of lie: unable to hide her lover, she disguises him. But, the lie is crude, the truth is visible, as it is very often the case. One can even think that a lie never lasts, even though it suits all parties involved. So the woman has to speak, to invent, to endlessly dress up this reality, which is as strange as impossible and of which she made herself a prisoner. Faced with her husband's questions, she pretends to assure and foresee everything. She gives even good and flattering information: for this seductive woman it is a question of captivating her husband with her speech.

This is how lies can work— to become plausible, they must persuade by using all possible rhetorical means, even if the task is impossible.

Paradox of lie: the more visible and enormous, or absurd, the more credible it is. This is where the problem of choice, in private as in society: do we buy this improbable speech, or do we refuse it? In both cases, the price is high and we often prefer the easy option: accepting the lie, because the conflict would be too costly in the immediate future. The husband chooses this path, unless he thinks that the shadow of the truth is sufficiently prominent that it does not have to be told. To go further would be to provoke more lies. It is better to stop here and leave the place.

Truth

For the Sufis, truth is as important as powerful. A lie is fake, fragile, ephemeral, ridiculous. Of course, in some stories, it lasts longer. It is necessary that the whole story is told for the unveiling to take place, or not. Of course, the absolute truth or reality (al-Haqq) that every Sufi initiate seeks is a long journey, a slow ascent, at the end of which there remains only the absolute, only God, which is accessible to relatively few chosen ones which requires a master. To realize such a vision, one must develop the inner eye: the ordinary man is blind to such knowledge, mainly because of the imperfection of his soul. It is therefore a question of purifying the being, through various tests, in order to be able to see, by overcoming the veiling of the material world, both of the subject and of events and things. It is not a question of knowledge, but of a practice, of interpersonal skills, of a commitment where one works on perseverance, sincerity, devotion, courage and love, necessary qualities to commit oneself and remain on this path. Mere curiosity is hardly enough: it is vain and frail.

The truth is always there, very present, at our disposal, if we are willing to see it, if our heart is open, if it is not obsessed with desire and fear, those passions that generate chaos and illusion, that is, lie. This is how this story invites us to see reality with the necessary distance, a perspective that shows us the crudity and the derisory of the baloney.

What should we think of this man who says nothing? He questions, but hardly criticizes the absurdity that is presented to him. Something seems strange to him, enough to question reality, but perhaps he has too much to lose, unlike us. He thinks about his social condition, about the disparity of status between the two families; he really does not see the pantomime that is taking place before his eyes. He would not totally ignore the lie, but his questions seem rather to beg for reassuring words. Is not that too often what we expect from others? To be reassured, we are ready for any compromise. But history does not tell us what it is: the truth remains a mystery.

Shame

Apart from lies, the most striking aspect of our heroine's speech is her total lack of shame. The contrast between the qualities one might expect of a trustworthy wife and the obviously unworthy behavior she displays. The appearance she gives herself. The appearance she gives herself is far inferior to what others have a right to expect, whether it be a stranger or even more so her husband. Her moral conscience should therefore work on her, but this does not seem to be the case, although it is difficult or impossible to determine what is going on inside her; we only perceive the exteriority of her being, her words and actions. It is up to us to think that she cannot be unharmed by her choices.

Motivated by fear or desire, the wife lends herself to a scabrous game. How long can this game last? It is primarily she who must certainly ask herself this question. In the end, on a moral level, what does she risk the most? Humiliation in front of others, when it will no longer be possible to disguise her fault? Or indignity before her own conscience? In both cases, her image of herself will be clearly devalued. Unless one presupposes the total amorality of her being, which remains a possibility, although always difficult to suppose in a human being. Sartre raises the problem of the glance of others as a condition or constraint of the moral

conscience. This perhaps explains the efforts of this woman to make her story hold in the eyes of her husband.

On the other hand, the husband raises the problem of shame: in the unequal relationship between wealth and poverty. We can take this remark as an inverted analogy– ironic?– between humility or modesty on the one side, indecency and impropriety on the other. Shame emerges in the gap between these two ways of being. Who is the truly rich, proud or humble? Who is the poor, the sincere or the liar? The concept of modesty is appropriate here, with its double meaning of humility and prudishness. The man claims the poverty of his family, which signifies honesty and dignity, as opposed to the wealth of the so-called woman, which symbolizes duplicity and immorality. One understands in the context the lie that the said wealth symbolizes.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why would the husband return unexpectedly?
- Why would the wife deny evidence so crudely?
- Why does the husband not openly denounce his wife?
- Does the husband trust his wife?
- Is the husband a weak man?
- Is the woman cynical?
- What game is played between the husband and wife?
- Is the truth possible between the husband and wife?
- Is the husband consistent?
- Why does the husband leave in the end?

Reflection

- ★ Should we trust our intuition?
- ★ Is full trust blind?
- ★ Do others always finally betray us?
- ★ Can we really hide the truth?
- ★ What are the main reasons to lie?
- ★ Is it always appropriate to denounce a lie?
- ★ Are we victims of our own lies?
- ★ Can a lie have a positive function in human relations?
- ★ Is morality personal or collective?
- ★ Should we avoid shame?

Chapter 6 The angel of death

Can we escape destiny?

ONE DAY, A RELATIVE OF KING SOLOMON PRESENTED HIMSELF AT THE PALACE AND REQUESTED AN URGENT AUDIENCE. WHEN THE MAN ARRIVED BEFORE THE KING'S THRONE, THE MONARCH NOTICED HIS PALE FACE, HIS BLUE LIPS, HIS SHALLOW BREATHING ASKED HIM:

– YOU DON'T LOOK WELL! WHAT HAPPENED?

– IT'S TERRIBLE! THIS MORNING, I WAS IN THE MARKET, WHEN AMIDST THE CROWD, I RECOGNIZED AZRAËL, THE ANGEL OF DEATH. WHEN HE NOTICED THAT I WAS OBSERVING HIM, HE GAVE ME A SCARY LOOK, FULL OF ANGER. I DON'T KNOW WHY, BUT HE WAS FURIOUS WITH ME.

– I UNDERSTAND, BUT WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO? HE IS THE MOST POWERFUL ANGEL OF ALL.

– I PRAY THEE, O GREAT KING! THOU WHO ARE SO POWERFUL! HELP ME!

– BUT I'VE TOLD YOU I CANNOT DO ANYTHING AGAINST HIM. HOW CAN I HELP YOU?

– THOU, WHO COMMAND THE ELEMENTS, ASK THE GREATEST WIND TO CARRY ME AWAY FROM HERE, FAR AWAY, TO INDIA. FOR MY SALVATION AND THE SALVATION OF MY SOUL!

THE KING COMPLIED AND ASKED THE GREATEST WIND TO CARRY THE POOR MAN TO INDIA, WHERE HE ARRIVED THE SAME DAY. SOMETIME LATER, THE ANGEL AZRAËL, WHO WAS STILL IN TOWN, CAME TO VISIT THE GREAT KING. THE LATTER, CURIOUS TO KNOW MORE, COULD NOT HELP QUESTIONING THE ANGEL. HE TOLD HIM WHAT HAD HAPPENED AND ASKED:

– WHY WERE YOU ANGRY WITH THIS MAN? HE IS RATHER PIOUS AND FAITHFUL. BUT YOU SCARED HIM SO MUCH THAT HE LEFT THE COUNTRY HURRIEDLY.

AZRAËL ANSWERED:

– NO, NOT AT ALL! I WASN'T ANGRY WITH HIM. HE MISUNDERSTOOD ME. I LOOKED AT HIM WITH GREAT SURPRISE. IN FACT, GOD HAD COMMANDED ME TO SEEK HIM, BECAUSE HIS TIME HAD COME. BUT IT IS TOMORROW, IN INDIA, THAT I SHALL TAKE HIS LIFE. THEREFORE, I WAS VERY SURPRISED. I THOUGHT TO MYSELF: "HOW CAN HE BE HERE TODAY IN INDIA TOMORROW? THIS MAN MUST REALLY HAVE WINGS TO MOVE THAT QUICKLY!".

Interpretation

To interpret is to explain and make explicit the meaning of a piece of information, a word, a fact, a phenomenon, an action, etc. It is to seize the essence of a work, a message or a behavior to give an account of it. It is to reproduce an original creation in a specific way that belongs to the performer, without betraying the original intention and content of the author. It is thus to combine objectivity and subjectivity in a legitimate way.

One cannot understand without interpreting, since the very act of understanding implies an appropriation, a translation, what one could name a "digestion", a restructuration according to modalities of the one who "ingests" the meaning. One necessarily finds there subjectivity in relation to the initial object. The question remains where to draw the line between a reformulation, a reproduction, a translation that are acceptable or plausible those that seem illegitimate to us.

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With this difficulty, the tension of the interpretation arises, between reason and feelings. Understanding is an act of reasoning to seize or to distil a content, in order to make it palpable, understandable, communicable. There, interpretation is necessary. Sad passions, as Spinoza calls them, obstruct such a gesture of reason: fear, anger, resentment, what we feel when something seems to threaten our integrity, our coherence. For him, such feelings imply losing power of being. The reason does not function then according to its own operative nature: it is perverted and produces inadequate ideas.

This is what happens to the hero of this story. He is afraid of death, so he makes a big mistake when he meets Azrael. He attributes anger to him, whereas the angel simply expresses surprise. Do we not all do this when we fear something? We read the world with fearful eyes, thus reinforcing our own conviction of its dangerous nature. Too big is the temptation of constantly proving that we were right to be wary! Perhaps we should start by mistrusting our interpretations.

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Fatality and freedom

The irony of this story is that this man, who claims to enjoy freedom who takes the liberty to request Solomon's help, is only fulfilling what was intended. How should we understand this paradoxical reality? Does it mean that we are not free, because everything is written in advance? There are different conceptions of freedom, which are opposed to each other. For

example, in Descartes, we find the concept of "free will", which is articulated in the fact of being able to say "yes or no". For Spinoza, freedom is assimilated to the consciousness of our determinations and to the understanding of the causes. For Sartre, it is rather a concept of existential responsibility: to assume its singular being, its choices and their consequences.

For the Sufis, freedom is above the capacity of the human being to free himself from his ego, of which he is very often a slave, when he has not succeeded in dominating this ghost by the inner fight. The soul is the whole cosmos, it is the perfect copy of it. Therefore one can dominate the cosmos or be dominated by it, depending on the work one did. To be free, the soul must purify itself of all vanities, of all that is not God.

The hero of our story, in order to be free, should therefore accept death, because it is an integral part of reality, it is constitutive of existence. To refuse this reality, to be afraid of it, is to refuse the finitude of the being, not to trust, not to be free. What some call "fatality" is the nature of reality, what we seek to fight because the order of the world does not suit us. Death is one of the best examples, since it represents the end of our singularity that we often set up as absolute. To be free is to know not to listen to our own vanities, our own reduced, reducing and fearful subjectivity.

Escape and self-acceptance

What is the hero of this story running from when he comes to Solomon for help? One could answer that he is escaping from his own reality. Our death can be conceived as something external to ourselves, or as an intrinsic part of our existence. For Epictetus or Sartre, death does not concern us, since it does not concern our existence: it is a simple interruption of it. But another philosophical tradition maintains, like Montaigne, that teaching men to die is to teach them to live. It is therefore a question of accepting death, as a condition for accepting oneself. Heidegger criticizes the common temptation to escape death by speaking of an indeterminate "one", rather than appropriating this death as the "unconditional and unsurpassable" of our own reality.

Beyond death itself, it is the concept of finitude that is at stake. There is a tendency in the human mind to think of itself as absolute, as infinite. A certain tendency to immoderation that is content to never think of the limit or the imperfection of its being that naturally tends to fight or to ignore everything that could contradict its expectations. Such a tendency is the cause of many frustrations, anger or resentments, when unfortunately reality imposes itself. It would then be a matter, as Descartes suggests, of changing one's desires rather than the order of the world. But such work on oneself, when we try to do it, often seems to be impossible.

Thus, the hero of our story nevertheless tries to escape from his own destiny, from the divine will, from reality. He does not realize that no matter how fast and clever he is, he will hardly be able to escape from what belongs to him, from what suits him, from what he is.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why did the man misunderstand Azraël's expression?
- Why is Azraël the most powerful angel of all?

- Why is death represented by an angel?
- What does Solomon represent in this story?
- Why does Solomon accomplish the man's request?
- Is the man really "pious and faithful"?
- Why does the man claim to fear for the salvation of his soul?
- Should Azraël be surprised by the turn of events?
- What is the man really running away from?
- What does India represent in this story?

Reflection

- ★ Why do we fear death?
- ★ Is death part of life?
- ★ Is it possible to fully accept yourself?
- ★ Are we inhabited by a desire for infinite?
- ★ Why does objectivity pose a problem?
- ★ Should we passively accept the course of things?
- ★ Does fear prevent us from living?
- ★ Are we "condemned to be free", as claimed Sartre?
- ★ Is destiny a reality?
- ★ Can we love fate?

Chapter 7 The gnat and the elephant

Do we need to be recognized by others?

THERE WAS ONCE A GNAT, KNOWN TO ALL FOR ITS HIGH SENSITIVITY, NAMED NAMOUSS THE PERCEPTIVE. ONE DAY, AFTER PONDERING HIS CONDITION, HE DECIDED TO MOVE, FOR GOOD AND SUFFICIENT REASONS. HE CHOSE A HIGHLY SUITABLE VENUE: THE EAR OF AN ELEPHANT. HE BROUGHT ALL HIS BELONGINGS AND SETTLED IN DUE FORM IN THIS VAST AND ATTRACTIVE HOME. TIME PASSED. NAMOUSS RAISED SEVERAL GENERATIONS OF LITTLE GNATS WHOM HE SENT INTO THE IMMENSITY OF THE WORLD. LIKE ALL GNATS, HE KNEW ALTERNATELY FEELINGS OF EUPHORIA AND ANXIETY, JOY AND SORROW, DISSATISFACTION AND FULFILLMENT. THE EAR OF THE ELEPHANT HAD BECOME HIS HOME. HE BECAME CONVINCED—AS IT ALWAYS HAPPENS IN SUCH CASES— THAT THERE WAS A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HIS LIFE, HIS STORY, HIS VERY BEING, THIS BEAUTIFUL MANSION. THE EAR WAS SO WARM, SO DEEP, SO WELCOMING, IT WAS THE SCENE OF SO MANY EXPERIENCES! OBVIOUSLY, WHEN HE MOVED IN, HE HAD FULFILLED THE MANY OBLIGATIONS AND RITUALS REQUIRED BY THE SITUATION. ON ARRIVING, HE HAD FORMALLY DECLARED HIS INTENTION WITH THE HIGHEST POSSIBLE VOLUME OF HIS LITTLE VOICE.

– O ELEPHANT! KNOW THAT NO ONE BUT I, NAMOUSS THE PERCEPTIVE, NOW INTENDS TO ESTABLISH HIS RESIDENCE IN THIS PLACE! SINCE IT IS YOUR EAR, ACCORDING TO THE CUSTOM, I INFORM YOU OF MY DECISION.

OF COURSE, THE ELEPHANT HAD NOT RAISED ANY OBJECTION SINCE HE HAD HEARD NOTHING. BESIDES, TO TELL THE TRUTH, HE NEVER NOTICED IN ANY WAY THE PRESENCE OF THE IMPOSING GNAT FAMILY. FINALLY THE DAY CAME WHEN NAMOUSS DECIDED, AFTER MUCH DELIBERATION, TO MOVE AGAIN, FOR SIGNIFICANT AND COMPELLING REASONS. ACCORDING TO THE SACRED CUSTOM, HE PREPARED A STATUTORY DECLARATION AND SHOUTED IT IN THE EAR OF THE ELEPHANT. RECEIVING NO RESPONSE, HE REPEATED HIS ANNOUNCEMENT, STRONGER STILL, WITH NO MORE REACTION. STUBBORNLY, HE SAID IT A THIRD TIME, DETERMINED TO BE HEARD, REITERATING HIS IMPERATIVE AND ELOQUENT WORDS.

– O ELEPHANT! KNOW THAT I, NAMOUSS THE PERCEPTIVE, INTEND TO LEAVE MY HOME AND MY HOUSE, ABANDON MY RESIDENCE IN THIS EAR THAT IS YOURS, WHERE I LIVED SO LONG. I AM DOING IT, FOR SIGNIFICANT AND SUFFICIENT CAUSES, THAT I AM READY TO ACCOUNT FOR." THIS TIME, THE WORDS OF THE GNAT FINALLY REACHED THE EAR OF THE ELEPHANT, WHO HEARD A VAGUE RUSTLING AND MOVED HIS TRUNK. GLAD TO SEE THE ELEPHANT WAS MEDITATING UPON HIS WORDS, NAMOUSS YELLED:

– WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO SAY IN RESPONSE TO THIS NEWS? HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT MY DEPARTURE?

THE BIG ANIMAL THEN RAISED HIS ENORMOUS HEAD AND PUSHED ONE OR TWO TRUMPETS THAT NAMOUSS GRACIOUSLY ACCEPTED AS A SIGN OF ACQUIESCENCE.

Sensitivity

The story tells us that the gnat Namouss was endowed with great sensitivity. This certainly means that this gnat was able to grasp the slightest variations of the outside world, that it was able to perceive and receive a lot of information from its environment. Its senses were

sharp, which is quite appropriate for the delicacy and fragility of a small, highly intuitive gnat. One could also attribute to him the other meaning of sensitivity, rather related to feelings and emotions, which would indicate a capacity to be easily affected subjectively by external and internal events, to feel according to the situations a certain pain or a certain pleasure, with all the amplitude of the changes of mood which that implies.

This is not the case for the elephant, this huge animal with a thick and resistant skin. He is hard of hearing, despite the immensity of his auditory organ, which can serve as a vast home for a colony of gnats. He does not hear much when he hears, it is not sure that he understands, because he is not very perceptive, unlike Namouss. Some of us may be like the elephant, hard of hearing, in spite of the imposing size of its ears, endowed with a thick skin that makes it insensitive to others. Should we therefore conclude that the fine gnat represents the example to follow?

The attentive reader will certainly see the ridiculous side of the hero of the story. His extreme sensitivity seems to prevent him from realizing to what extent his existence only represents a tiny detail in the immensity of the universe, even in comparison with a simple elephant. He attributes considerable importance to his actions, to his words, to his existence. One could accuse him here of fatuity and self-importance as regards the inordinate value he attributes to his being, a negligible entity in this world. Of course, one could also call this self-respect or self-esteem, if it were not for the absurdity of the gesture. The functioning of Namouss, although excessive and laughable, reminds us of the behavior of many people who give great importance to each moment of their existence. We see them pursuing with application, constancy and zeal various objectives that may seem vain to the outside observer. Like the ants that struggle to carry pellets larger than themselves, which makes us laugh. They are listening to their sensations, their feelings. Their exacerbated conscience of themselves and their excessive subjectivity lead them to take themselves for the center of the world and to make their microcosm the derisory measure of the macrocosm.

Communication and recognition

Namouss tries to communicate with the elephant. He does not want to just speak, or to express himself; his speech has a purpose: he wants to obtain something. We understand that he spends a lot of energy to be heard by the elephant, he insists in spite of the difficulties and one can wonder what is the purpose of all his efforts. We can nevertheless notice that he deploys his communicative energy more specifically at the time of his moving-in and moving-out moments. It is at these times that he wishes to connect with the elephant. The desire for recognition seems to us the simplest hypothesis to put forward. Yet this recognition must come from the outside, since it is the outside, i.e. the world, which represents reality, embodied here by the elephant. It is thus him who must be in the heart of the ritual of recognition.

At first, Namouss simply announces the "moment", taking for granted the recognition of the elephant. His word is performative: it is in itself an action. Nevertheless, before leaving, he cannot be satisfied with a tacit agreement: his own ritual does not satisfy him without the elephant's effective and explicit participation. His initial conviction as to the significance of the crucial moments of his existence apparently gives way to a certain doubt, which he cannot avoid dispelling before he leaves for good. He wishes the elephant to identify with him, to put

himself in his shoes as himself identifies with his home, as the story tells us. By means of this "communion", he pretends to be understood and honored.

But alas, the whole drama of communication is that it includes the other— the speaker depends on the listener— in all his differences and otherness, which is not necessarily what one would like. Beyond one's own intention, one transmits the objective reality of our message, which can be very different from the intention itself on the other hand from what the subjectivity of the receiver can perceive. For the reader of this story, an objective observer, the object of the communication borders on the ridiculous. For the elephant, it is undoubtedly only the light hum of an insect, somewhat boring. But Namouss, full of hope, always centered on himself, is visibly satisfied with a simple semblance of recognition.

Meaning of life

Namouss, like most of us, obviously wants to give meaning to his life. First of all, to have a meaning is to grant a significance to this life, thus producing a positive effect: understanding, admiration, or pleasure. It is necessary that this life "speaks", "says" something, to produce a message worthy of the name message, something that can serve as a symbolic and generous epitaph, that will show that this life was not lived in a vacuum. Meaning is also the reason, the foundation of being, the spirit that animates this particular existence, what this life embodies and represents. Then, meaning is direction: what this life is heading towards, its outcome, its accomplishment. One finds there the concept, dear to Sartre, of life as a continuation of actions which constitute the project of a free and autonomous subject: its existence. Meaning is also the reasonable and organized dimension of this life, in opposition to chaos or disorder. We can find ourselves in it, we can grasp its unity, it is vectorized and not inchoative. And finally, the meaning of life is its legitimacy, what makes it worthy of being lived, thanks to its interest on the moral, social, aesthetic, existential or other level.

This is what Namouss is looking for, intuitively, without being conscious of it: he wants to give meaning to his life. For that, he needs the elephant as an interlocutor, because the latter represents a significant entity, likely to grant the expected and supposedly necessary meaning to his life as a gnat. The elephant embodies the environment, the place, the other, the world, the circumstances, all realities that can give value and importance not only to him, Namouss, but to the many generations of gnats that have extended his own existence. For that, he must announce the unique specificity of his existence, proclaim his will, ritualize his actions, sacralize the events that concern him of course to obtain recognition from the "world" in order to make coherent the value that he places on itself and to confirm it. Thus he provides meaning and interest to the meager entity he represents, a kind of eternity to its ephemeral duration, by anchoring it in the immensity of the world.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- How important is the fact that Namouss is "perceptive"?
- Why does Namouss respect rituals?
- What rapport entertains Namouss with the ear of the elephant?

- Why does the elephant not have a name, unlike the gnat?
- Does the gnat have "good and sufficient" reasons for moving?
- Why does Namouss insist on getting a response from the elephant before leaving?
- Did the elephant answer Namouss?
- Do the gnat and the elephant understand each other?
- Does the gnat need the elephant in order to exist?
- Does the gnat indulge in wishful thinking?

Reflection

- ★ Does life need meaning in order to have value?
- ★ Is there something pathetic in human existence?
- ★ Is the human being susceptible?
- ★ Why do we make projects?
- ★ Why do we pretend to be special or unique?
- ★ What do we expect from others?
- ★ Do human beings tend to practice wishful thinking?
- ★ To love oneself necessarily involves a relationship with others?
- ★ Can we laugh at everything?
- ★ Do you rather look like Namouss or the elephant?

Is old age a calamity?

AN ELDERLY MAN, CONCERNED ABOUT HIS HEALTH, WENT TO CONSULT A DOCTOR. HE COMPLAINED AT LENGTH, FEELING THE WEAKENING OF HIS INTELLECTUAL FACULTIES AND ASKED WHAT HE COULD DO TO REMEDY THIS PROBLEM. THE DOCTOR LISTENED PATIENTLY, THEN EXPLAINED THAT THIS WAS CERTAINLY DUE TO THE PHENOMENON OF AGING. NOT SATISFIED WITH THAT RESPONSE, THE PATIENT EXCLAIMED:

- BUT MY SIGHT AS WELL IS WEAKENING!
- THIS IS ALSO BECAUSE OF AGE, ANSWERED THE MAN OF ART.
- AND MY BACK HURTS, ALSO BECAUSE OF AGE, PERHAPS?!

THE OLD MAN WENT ON, VISIBLY ANNOYED.

- INDEED, THIS IS TYPICAL OF OLD AGE.
- AND THE FACT THAT I HAVE TROUBLE DIGESTING EVERYTHING I EAT, I GUESS I CANNOT DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT EITHER?!
- THAT’S EXACTLY IT! WITH AGE, THE DIGESTIVE SYSTEM WEAKENS GRADUALLY.
- I WAS GOING TO EXPLAIN TO YOU ALSO THAT SOMETIMES IT’S HARD TO BREATHE, BECAUSE MY CHEST FEELS UNDER PRESSURE, BUT OF COURSE, TO TELL YOU THIS WILL NOT HELP IN ANY WAY, ISN’T IT?

– THIS IS NORMAL INDEED! YOU ARE NOW OLD, OLD AGE BRINGS MANY EVILS, OUR BODY ATROPHIES, ITS CAPACITY OF RESILIENCE DIMINISHES. IT’S NOT VERY PLEASANT, BUT YOU HAVE TO ACCEPT THIS SAD FACT.

THE OLD MAN WAS THEN COMPLETELY ANGRY.

- YOU REALLY ARE INCOMPETENT! YOU TELL NONSENSE! YOU KNOW NOTHING AT ALL ABOUT MEDICINE! WHAT IS YOUR UTILITY IF YOU CANNOT CURE ANYTHING? ALL DISEASES HAVE A CURE, THAT’S MEDICINE! BUT YOU HAVE NO CLUE! ONE REALLY WONDERS WHERE YOU LEARNED YOUR CRAFT!

AT THIS, THE DOCTOR REPLIED:

- YOU ARE NOW OVER SEVENTY YEARS OF AGE! THIS IS ALSO WHAT EXPLAINS YOUR ANGER AND YOUR BITTER WORDS!

Old age

Old age is defined in several ways. On the one hand, chronologically, by the number of years, as the last part of life. It is therefore proportional to the total number of years to live, which makes this quantity vary according to the times and the conditions of life. Secondly, they are stages of life, related to individual and social functioning. The expression "third age" is characteristic of it: after the period of learning, or youth, that of action, or maturity, comes that of withdrawal, or contemplation. Old age is also defined by a way of being and acting, both of the body and the mind. Thus, our current culture pretends to postpone old age by promoting well-being, hygiene and activity in the elderly, at the risk of denying the reality of age.

It is clear that the weakening of the body, illness, physiological and psychological disorders, physical pain, lack of energy, plus the fear of impending death, can lead to anxiety and a

certain withdrawal into oneself, or into the immediate, like a fall back into childhood. Daily life becomes more difficult. The loss of intellectual faculties, memory, concentration or other the reduction of physical capacities, debilitating, lead to a decrease in autonomy, which can be painful or even unbearable.

In any case, beyond the physical and circumstantial hazards, one realizes that some people age well others badly. It seems that the character of our story falls into the second category: he is inhabited by anger and bitterness. A question imposes itself. Do we grow old as we have lived? This last period would then be the coherent completion of our past existential choices. Or maybe old age constitutes a ultimate chance to determine our nature, the meaning and the value of our existence. Old age is defined in several ways. On the one hand, chronologically, by the number of years, as the last part of life. It is therefore proportional to the total number of years to live, which makes this quantity vary according to the times and the conditions of life. Secondly, they are stages of life, related to individual and social functioning. The expression "third age" is characteristic of it: after the period of learning, or youth, that of action, or maturity, comes that of withdrawal, or contemplation. Old age is also defined by a way of being and acting, both of the body and the mind. Thus, our current culture pretends to postpone old age by promoting well-being, hygiene and activity in the elderly, at the risk of denying the reality of age.

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Wisdom

Wisdom is first of all a form of knowledge that could be defined as "right knowledge of things". Plato defines it as "the knowledge of what we know and what we do not know": the awareness of our shortcomings and imperfections would play a fundamental role in wisdom. It is a question of knowing the extent and limits of our knowledge in order to be wise. One realizes then that wisdom does not touch only the question of knowledge, but also that of behavior towards oneself, towards the reality of things. For there is a natural tendency of greed, of excess in desire, in the human being, which makes it difficult for him to resolve to restrict his aspirations and his pretensions, to accept his limits, to let go. It is for this reason that the "Know thyself", inspired by the temple of Delphi, remains the injunction par excellence that Socrates recommends. It is a question of reconciling oneself with one's own finitude as a condition for surpassing oneself. This is what the hero of this story is unable to do. He does not accept his ageing, nor his illness

because his knowledge of himself is biased, so is his "miraculous" vision of medicine.

From this, we naturally move on to another meaning of the concept of wisdom: "To conduct one's life and actions in a moderate and prudent manner." It is a question of avoiding excesses and immoderation, of escaping from that hybris so natural to man, which the gods punish as the sin of pride. Faced with this derangement of passions, as a response to this abusive attitude, Aristotle proposes the ideal of the "golden mean", the "place" of temperance. The middle, the balance, the harmony are indicators of perfection and virtue, the nature of vice being disproportion.

Wisdom is also common sense, the one that makes us act and think with discernment. Here again, our old man is out of step: he has no common sense. As he does not support reality, however obvious, his judgment, his words and his actions are senseless. He is driven by the aberrations of his own subjectivity and not by the objectivity of judgment based on the obvious.

Finally, wisdom is behavior in view of a good, which indicates a critical dimension since it is a question of distinguishing and separating the good from the bad, the right from the false, etc. It is no longer a question of acting piecemeal, following our desires, our impulses, our reactions, but to control ourselves and to our actions in a conscious and just way such as reason or morality. Our man does not seek the good, he only listens to his desires. He does not want to suffer, he does not want to get old, he is afraid of what is happening to him and he gets angry with anyone or anything that does not conform to his expectations. Neither truth nor goodness animates him: he is in a state of total infantile regression. It remains to be seen whether wisdom is necessarily a quality or a simple consolation: a posteriori rationalization of an unappealing fate.

Fatality and fatalism

Fatality is the character of what is ineluctable. Phenomena of this nature are therefore a matter of necessity, of a priori determination. It seems that there is a natural or supernatural force, such as nature or fate, which leads to an implacable course of events. The example par excellence of fatality is ageing accompanied by death, undoubtedly because for many people this phenomenon represents the most inevitable and unpleasant aspect of life. We can nevertheless ask ourselves if fatality is really a fatality. For, by problematizing it, we have two different possible attitudes, fundamentally opposed. On the one hand the acceptance of this fatality, when *nolens volens* we reconcile ourselves with it, at worst we accept it, which can be called fatalism or determinism. On the other hand, its refusal, through a claim of freedom, autonomy or power of the subject, which we can call voluntarism.

On the side of "fatalism", we find for example stoicism, although we can prefer here the qualifier of "determinism", because the principle which governs the order of things is rational—even if it is of divine nature—and thus remains relatively predictable and comparable to a scientific approach. Fate can then be defined as the causal chain of events. "Pure" fatalism would be more of a religious nature: the cause of events is attributed to the divine power, whose reason, if there is any, is not accessible to our reduced intellect. One can only suffer from the reality of things without pretending to explain it or to find meaning in it. Although, here again, we can oppose a religious vision where man must mainly accept passively the divine will, to the one where man must rather act according to this will. In opposition to fatalism, we find

existentialism, for example Sartre, for whom the reality of our existence is not defined by some a priori of nature or transcendence, but by a deliberate project, from actions determined by the subject. Nevertheless, if fatalism can be synonymous with pessimism and defeatism, since we cannot change anything to the course of the events, we can also find courage, even temerity, a certain radical hard-line, since, in any case, the dice is already cast.

To accept or refuse the "reality" of things: this is one of the most fundamental questions that we have to answer. Wisdom would then be to know how to distinguish between what is within our power and what does not depend on it. In any case, the opinions will not be the same and that is precisely what is happening in this story. The doctor explains everything that is happening to his patient by the fact of his age, an inescapable phenomenon that leads to irreversible actions. Whether it is his physical or mental state, everything is caused by the process and state of aging. Is this doctor rational or insensitive? Paradoxically, he implicitly invites his patient to accept this reality, while explaining his bitterness, his anger and his refusal of resignation by this same age. No doubt he asks him to sublimate this determination. This would be his only true freedom: to change the way he looks at things.

The patient can be qualified as either voluntarist or stubborn. His criticism of the powerlessness of the doctor and his science can be seen as relevant, insofar as the latter wants to justify everything with the same explanation: the effects of age. One can think that this explanation is easy, fatalistic and incompetent. On the other hand, one can also find the patient ridiculous in that he denies the reality of his situation, expressing distrust and resentment towards the doctor, a resistance that simply reflects the moral suffering and bitterness that have overtaken him.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Does the man consult the doctor because he is sick?
- Does the man need to go to the doctor?
- Is the doctor empathetic towards his patient?
- Is the doctor a good doctor?
- Is the patient right to be upset at his doctor?
- Is it age that causes the anger of the patient?
- Does the man seek a form of consolation?
- Does the man really know what he wants?
- Is the patient wise?
- Is the doctor wise?

Reflection

- ★ Should we fight or accept old age?
- ★ Is old age a culmination or a decline?
- ★ Are there different forms of wisdom?
- ★ Do we have a moral obligation to be wise?

- ★ Is moderation always advisable?
- ★ Is fatality a reality or a belief?
- ★ Can one love fate, as Nietzsche recommends?
- ★ Is it better to change our desires rather than the order of the world, as proposed by Descartes?
- ★ Does our view on things determine their reality?
- ★ Can we abuse medicine?

Does friendship always lead to conflict?

DURING A LONG AND ARDUOUS JOURNEY, THREE MEN BECAME FRIENDS. THEY HAD SHARED PLEASURES AND PAINS, THEY PUT ALL THEIR RESOURCES IN COMMON. HOWEVER, ONE EVENING, AFTER A LONG WALK, THEY REALIZED PROVISIONS WERE DWINDLING: ONLY SOME WATER WAS LEFT AT THE BOTTOM OF A BOTTLE AND A PIECE OF BREAD. NOT KNOWING HOW TO DISTRIBUTE SUCH A SMALL AMOUNT, THEY COULD NOT AGREE AND ENDED UP LENGTHILY ARGUING. AS EVENING FELL, ONE OF THEM SUGGESTED GOING TO BED AND PUT THE DECISION OFF TILL THE NEXT MORNING. "LET'S GO TO SLEEP," HE SUGGESTED UPON AWAKENING, THE ONE WHO HAD THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DREAM WILL DECIDE HOW TO PROCEED." THE OTHER TWO ACCEPTED THE PROPOSAL. THE NEXT DAY THEY GOT UP AT DAWN. THE FIRST BEGAN TO TELL:

– THIS IS MY DREAM. I WAS TRANSPORTED INTO A WONDERFUL PLACE, SO NICE THAT NO WORDS CAN DESCRIBE IT. I MET AN OLD MAN WHO SAID, "THE FOOD IS YOURS BY RIGHT, FOR YOUR LIFE, PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE, IS MERITORIOUS AND RIGHTLY ADMIRER BY ALL.

THEN IT WAS THE TURN OF THE SECOND.

– IT'S NOTHING, COMPARED TO MY OWN DREAM. I SAW UNFOLDING IN A SINGLE INSTANT MY ENTIRE LIFE, PAST AND FUTURE. THEN APPEARED TO ME A STRANGE BEING, A KIND OF ANGEL, WHO TOLD ME: "IT IS YOU WHO DESERVE TO DRINK THE WATER AND EAT THE BREAD, BECAUSE YOU ARE WISER AND MORE PATIENT THAN YOUR TWO COMPANIONS. YOU HAVE TO BE WELL FED, BECAUSE YOUR DESTINY IS TO GUIDE MEN."

THE THIRD TRAVELER SPOKE IN TURN.

– IN MY DREAM, I DID NOT SEE ANYTHING, I DID NOT HEAR ANYTHING, I DID NOT SAY ANYTHING EITHER. BUT I FELT AN IRRESISTIBLE AND MYSTERIOUS FORCE THAT PUSHED ME TO GET UP, TO TAKE THE BREAD AND WATER AND CONSUME IT ON THE SPOT. I COULD NOT RESIST THAT'S WHAT I DID.

Inspiration – Intuition – Revelation

The three men cannot agree on a decision to share. Why would they defer their decision and compare their dreams? There are several reasons. The first is the proverbial "sleeping on it". Some processes cannot be accomplished immediately, the time of maturation is necessary. It is a form of wisdom to know how to practice this patience which allows us to postpone our actions in order to give them their rightful measure.

The other justification of this waiting, linked to the first one, is the principle of intuition. In this perspective, it is neither our will nor our rationality that allow us to judge adequately, but inspiration, a form of direct and immediate knowledge, not mastered, which does not rely on the discursive, voluntary and conscious processes, those of the reason. Thus, the decision comes to us by ways that we ignore the "surprising" result that appears to us as a revelation. It is simply a matter of waiting, of being confident and being ready to hear this inner voice that tells us the solution to the problem.

Of course, this "miraculous" power granted to intuition was often criticized, in particular by rationalist philosophers who saw in it a capitulation of reason, a subterfuge of the lazy intellect. Moreover, whoever adheres to this "instantaneous" vision of knowledge easily falls into the trap of omnipotence. Thanks to dreams and gods, he avoids giving arguments. Believing himself to be "inspired", the simple hypothesis of his error is unthinkable to him, which makes him rigid and narrow-minded, incapable of any critical distance from himself. "You invite yourself too quickly to the table of the divine," wrote Hegel in criticism of Schelling, the philosopher of identity, for whom "everything is perfectly one": real and ideal, nature and spirit, etc. It is undoubtedly one of the characteristics that opposes the prophet, even the wise man, to the philosopher: the first one is the receptacle of a knowledge which exceeds him, the second can give an account of what he knows, since his knowledge comes from empirical data or from a reasoning. Of course, modern psychology provides less mysterious and supernatural explanations for this type of revelations: it would be quite simply about the work of our unconscious. But in the end, this hardly changes the problem: should we reason to know, or should we rather trust our inspiration? Our three men, visibly exhausted, too stubborn or short of arguments, finally choose the second option, rightly or wrongly.

Merit

The three men argue over some leftover water and food. After resting, comparing their different dreams, the question of merit arises as the central subject of the debate, at least for the first two protagonists of the story. The third one completely bypasses this concept. This one refers to a presupposition of value: to have merit is to have value. As far as the human being is concerned, merit generally has a moral connotation, often linked to action: courage, integrity, perseverance etc. To say that a person has little merit implies that she may have not provided any of these qualities to accomplish the action in question. As a result, the one who has merit is worthy of a reward. This implies a certain entitlement, even a requirement. The concept of merit can take on a neutral, positive or negative connotation (he deserves to be punished) or exclusively positive (he is a man of merit).

If there is a reason for "merit", it is because there is a valorization. But if there is valorization, there is necessarily comparison therefore hierarchization and competition, desire and possession, opposition and conflict. To this, we could of course oppose the conceptions of gift, generosity or abandonment. The three men shared, they were "friends" as long as there was enough for all three of them, it was fine. But the moment food runs out, man becomes again a wolf to man, as Hobbes famously said.

Now let us look at what other criteria men could have used. Chance, the physical condition of each person, age or other criteria could have done the job just as well. Pascal recommends avoiding judging on moral value to decide a problem: he prefers the arbitrary and the conventional, which are much easier to use. To compare on merit is almost a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron: comparison goes against merit. If the latter is claimed, it is meaningless: true merit deserves nothing, it is its own reward. It would be like "demanding respect" or "ordering a gift". By stating loud and clear their "moral value" and by claiming a reward for it, the first two characters disqualify themselves: "True morality mocks morality", Pascal would say here. All the more so as the stakes of the debate are almost ridiculous. It is interesting to note that this

"moral" competition takes place at a time when equity or equality are disappearing. To decree one's own "morality" is a matter of tartuffery. From this point of view, the third character has the advantage of being relatively honest and straightforward. In the game of competition, he is the strongest, because he is the most transparent: he takes as he pleases. He plays the indicator of the situation, the one who does not bother with politeness or manners. It dismantles the hypocrisy of social conventions and exposes the preponderant role of bad faith.

Enigma

Some Sufi stories have an implicit moral that seems relatively clear, others are much more paradoxical. In this they resemble the koans of Zen Buddhism. These are small stories or simple aphorisms somewhat paradoxical, absurd or cryptic, which contravene logic and common sense, that the master proposes to the disciples as subject for meditation. Their purpose is to derail thinking, to divert it from its usual paths, in order to bring about satori or awakening. Of course, the present story seems to have an obvious moral for common sense: instead of discussing endlessly, theorizing and moralizing, it is better to take action. The gesture of the third man renders the pseudo-revelations and self-apologies of his two comparses: action takes precedence over words. But for the one who knows a little Sufi thinking, there is a somewhat cynical or egoistic dimension that does not suit this spiritual practice.

The third man clearly shows the reality of the first two: he makes the every man for himself explicit and thus wins the bet. Is he showing us the way forward? It would be the law of the strongest or the smartest. This would be a rural and banal wisdom, where cunning and voluntarism are advocated. But this is hardly in keeping with Sufi spiritualism. The latter requires rather the abandonment of the will, too much linked to a "sovereign" self, since it is a question of dying to oneself and abandoning oneself to the divine will. Moreover, there is a shameless egoism that does not suit the principle of love advocated by the Sufis. The enthusiast of wisdom may therefore be taken aback by this story.

It is undoubtedly this cognitive dissonance that this story aims to produce. It is of the same order as in Nasreddin Hodja's stories, a very popular tradition of Sufi tales, where one makes one think from the absurd and the incomprehensible. Who is right in this story? Absolutely no one: on the one hand, we have hypocritical characters who use morality and revelation to achieve their ends; on the other, an openly cynical character who denounces this hypocrisy while displaying the same self-centeredness. The text is somewhat enigmatic.

The choice of the riddle as a narrative and pedagogical model is not accidental. It is about inviting the reader to meditate by asking, without ever answering, what the author's "real" intention is. No question for the mind to form a definitive opinion: thinking must remain in the unfinished, the inchoate and the ephemeral. It must guess what is behind this strange story. Unfortunately, there is nothing to guess. Because a story worthy of the name resembles life, where nothing is given: thinking passes from error to error, each misunderstanding generously providing its share of enlightening and effective intuitions.

 A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN
Comprehension

- Are the three men friends?
- Why do the three men compete for so little?
- Why use a dream as criteria of judgment?
- What are the angels of those dreams?
- What is the main criterion used by the first companion?
- What is the main criterion used by the second companion?
- What differentiates the "argument" of the third companion?
- Are the first two men honest?
- Is the third man wise or cynical?
- Does the story justify the third companion?

Reflection

- ★ Can one legitimately claim to be more moral than another person?
- ★ Can merit be an inappropriate criterion?
- ★ Does friendship often lead to conflict?
- ★ Is action more real than reflection?
- ★ Can our dreams lie to us?
- ★ Why do oracles express themselves enigmatically?
- ★ Is the present more important than the future?
- ★ Is it good advice to "sleep on it"?
- ★ Is it reasonable to trust our intuitions?
- ★ Is the cynic a realist?

Chapter 10 The three advices

Are humans limited?

ONE DAY, A HUNTER CAUGHT A LITTLE BIRD IN HIS NET. TO HIS SURPRISE, HIS PREY BEGAN TO TALK TO HIM. AND THE BIRD TRIED TO CONVINCHE THE MAN TO RELEASE HIM.

– LET ME GO, HE SAID, WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH ME? I WILL BE OF NO USE! I AM SO SMALL AND THIN THAT YOU WILL NOT FIND ANYTHING TO EAT. BUT IF YOU RETURN ME MY FREEDOM INSTEAD, I WILL GRANT YOU THREE TIPS THAT WILL GREATLY HELP YOU IN LIFE. THE BIRD WILL GIVE HIM THE FIRST ADVICE WHILE STILL A PRISONER, THE SECOND WHEN RELEASED AND PERCHED IN A TREE, THE THIRD WHEN HE HAS REACHED THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN.

PERPLEXED, BUT SEEING THAT INDEED HE HAD NOT MUCH TO LOSE, THE HUNTER ACCEPTED THE PROPOSAL. AND HE HASTENED TO SOLICIT THE FIRST ADVICE. SO THE BIRD SAID:

– IF YOU LOSE SOMETHING, EVEN IF YOU WANT IT AS MUCH AS YOUR LIFE, NEVER REGRET THE LOSS.

THE MAN WAS SLIGHTLY SURPRISED BY THE ADVICE, HOWEVER, HE RELEASED THE BIRD, WHICH FLEW UP AND LANDED ON A BRANCH. THE MAN THEN SOUGHT THE SECOND ADVICE THE BIRD SAID:

– WHEN YOU HEAR SOMETHING THAT IS CONTRARY TO COMMON SENSE, NEVER BELIEVE IT WITHOUT RECEIVING EVIDENCE.

THEN THE BIRD FLEW TO THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN. THE MAN, INTRIGUED, FOLLOWED IT TO THE TOP, BUT BEFORE HE COULD ASK THE THIRD ADVICE, THE BIRD TOLD HIM IN A PROVOCATIVE TONE:

– OH! MISERABLE MAN! MY BODY CONTAINS TWO ENORMOUS AND PRECIOUS JEWELS! IF ONLY YOU HAD KILLED ME, YOU WOULD NOW BE THEIR HAPPY POSSESSOR!

AT THESE WORDS, THE HUNTER HAD A FIT OF ANGER, FURIOUS OF HAVING BEEN FOOLED, THINKING THAT A FORTUNE HAD ESCAPED HIM. WITH A SAD FACE, HE STILL ASKED THE BIRD TO GIVE ITS THIRD ADVICE.

THE BIRD THEN OUTRIGHT MOCKED HIM.

– WHAT A FOOL ARE YOU! YOU ARE WAITING FOR A THIRD ADVICE, WHILE YOU HAVE NEITHER UNDERSTOOD NOR LISTENED TO THE FIRST TWO I OFFERED YOU. REMEMBER! I ADVISED YOU TO REGRET NOTHING, NEVERTHELESS YOU ALREADY REGRET THAT YOU RELEASED ME. I ADVISED YOU NOT TO BELIEVE WHAT IS CONTRARY TO COMMON SENSE WITHOUT RECEIVING EVIDENCE, BUT YOU BELIEVED WITHOUT DOUBT THAT I HAVE IN FACT TWO HUGE JEWELS IN MY SKINNY BODY. IN NO TIME, YOU BELIEVE ANYTHING AND YOU LAMENT WHAT YOU THINK YOU HAVE LOST! YOU ARE SO STUPID! AND YOU WILL NEVER CHANGE. LIKE MOST MEN, YOU WILL REMAIN A PRISONER OF YOUR PREJUDICES AND YOUR NARROW-MINDED ATTITUDE.

Desire and blindness

The hero of this story is a hunter, a man looking for something, food in particular. He is a primal being: he eats what he finds. He represents brutality; to feed himself, he is willing to kill, thus he survives. In this pursuit, his desire takes precedence over all other considerations

about other living beings, or even about the whole world. For this reason, we can maintain that he is in a state of omnipotence; he listens only to the voice of his insatiable desire, of his implacable will.

When he catches a bird, he is surprised that it starts talking to him. Already, the order of the world is not what it should be. The bird asks him for its freedom back in exchange for three pieces of advice. But knowing the hunter's methods— it is not sure that such an immaterial proposal is enough for him— the bird uses a weighty argument, which it insists on: in any case, there is not much to lose, its body being small and emaciated. It also proposes to give the first advice while still a prisoner, to show that it can be trusted.

The man agrees when the bird gives its first advice about "regret", the man probably does not appreciate it is true worth, but simply keeps his word. Perhaps the advice does not speak to him, but he is curious to see what happens next, unless he already vaguely sees the point. The advice in question touches on the hunter's particular situation, which is driven by the desire to conquer and to possess: the bird advises him never to regret anything, even things of great value. The Sufi master usually tells the student what is closest to his heart, even if the student does not notice it right away. One can imagine that the hunter already regrets having given his word, since the advice is not about "practical" things, but about a point of wisdom, perhaps too evanescent. The hunter is too caught up in desire to hear what is said to him.

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Common sense and critical thinking

The hunter then releases the bird, which flies into the tree and gives his second piece of advice, this time on "common sense" and its critical ability. The story does not mention what goes

through the man's mind when he hears this second piece of advice, but out of dissatisfaction or curiosity, he follows the bird up the mountain to receive the third piece of advice. Something in that bird fascinates the man, perhaps the mere fact that it speaks, or that it utters unusual words, unless he can sense deep truths there which he does not grasp. Ordinary men who are concerned with practical and material things are fascinated with wise men, similarly to how the hunter is fascinated with the bird.

This is probably why, once on the mountain, the bird, who represents the master, decides it is time to test the student by setting him a trap. So it tells him the story of the two enormous jewels in its body. Of course, the man swallows the hook, thus showing he had not understood or believed the first two pieces of advice. He shows a possessive attitude, bearing to lose anything, even if it means making himself miserable through his excessive attachment to things.

Blinded by the feeling of possession, he takes this suggestion literally, without thinking for a second, even though he was advised never to accept without proof anything that goes against common sense. He could indeed believe the bird, wondering how such an idea could make sense. But he surely could not assume that this would be a metaphor for the two pieces of advice already offered: his view of the world is too material and reductive. In the same vein, it will be noted that on a moral level, for the hunter, the bird's life weighs nothing compared to the idea of wealth. Not for a moment will this aspect of things have any effect in the articulation of his judgment. After all, he is a hunter!

Consciousness and provocation

Reason is obscured by the preponderance and grip of expectation, by the lure of gain. Thus our hunter hears nothing, or forgets everything. And the bird points this out to him. Why wait for the third advice since he does not make the first two his own? At the first test he abandons the words of wisdom he received: with disconcerting ease he falls into regret and credulity. "You are so stupid!" it says to him. But how many men are like that, believing anything? Especially if it echoes their greed, their cupidity, their fancies, their mediocrity, their lowliness, their pettiness. One may wonder whether the bird says this to the hunter to incite him in the hope he may one day change, or simply to speak to him openly. If we stick to the Sufi pattern, the bird/master says what he has to say, provoking his disciple: it is up to the disciple to gain consciousness and evolve, or not. The reality principle is to confront each one with his responsibilities then let the subject decide for himself how he will react to the problem being brought to light.

Admittedly, one can think that our bird/master is violent. But this is comparable to the hunter's ingratitude, a moral and intellectual destitution. The latter seems to need a mental shock, a rupture that would produce a cognitive dissonance in him. The bird mocks the hunter: it takes his greed seriously, but not what it really is. In fact, he has received his third piece of advice, but he does not even notice it.

The first advice offered moral advice: how to be happy. The second offered intellectual advice: how to think. The third is a direct questioning of the subject, in order to induce a healthy shock. "Satori subit", one would say in Zen practice. No one knows what will become of it. Hopefully consciousness will be aroused.

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A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why does the hunter release the bird?
- Why is the hunter surprised by the first advice?
- What is the difference between the first and second advice?
- Why does the bird tell the story of the jewels?
- Why does the hunter not take the bird's advice?
- Did the bird actually give a third piece of advice?
- Why is the bird so sarcastic?
- Why is the main character in this story a hunter and not a farmer?
- Did the hunter learn anything during his adventure?
- What does the bird represent in this story?

Reflection

- ★ Should we never regret anything?
- ★ Are we all hunters?
- ★ Should we not believe anything strange without proof?
- ★ Is human being generally stubborn?
- ★ Are our desires bad advisers?
- ★ What prevents us from changing?
- ★ Is it appropriate to make fun of a person in order to educate them?

- ★ Is common sense an adequate criterion for judgement?
- ★ Is common sense common?
- ★ Is human being curious by nature?

Do we like being victims?

MAHMOUD COULD NOT DETERMINE HIMSELF, HE DID NOT KNOW HOW TO LEAD HIS LIFE. AFTER A FEW VAGUE ATTEMPTS AND INCONCLUSIVE EXPERIENCES, MANY DOUBTS INVADED HIS MIND. HE FANCIED SEVERAL PROJECTS, BUT SMARTING OVER HIS PAST, FEARING TO BE WRONG AGAIN, HE COULD NOT DECIDE WHAT PATH TO TAKE. MOREOVER, HIS PERSONAL SITUATION WAS BEGINNING TO CAUSE PROBLEMS IN REALITY, BECAUSE HE WAS STRUGGLING TO MEET HIS OWN NEEDS. ONE DAY HE DECIDED TO TAKE ADVICE FROM A SUFI SAGE.

– WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH MY LIFE? HE ASKED. WHAT DECISIONS SHOULD I MAKE? I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO. . .

PATIENTLY, THE MAN LISTENED FOR A WHILE TO MAHMOUD'S COMPLAINTS, THEN INTERRUPTED HIM:

– IT'S VERY SIMPLE, MAHMOUD! GO INTO THE FOREST, OBSERVE NATURE, YOU CERTAINLY WILL RECEIVE A HEALTHY LIFE LESSON.

MAHMOUD OBEYED AND WENT INTO THE FOREST. HE WAS WATCHING CAREFULLY, WITHOUT REALLY CONCLUDING ANYTHING, WHEN HE NOTICED NEAR A BUSH A FOX QUIETLY LOUNGING, WITH ITS BELLY VISIBLY WELL ROUNDED. LOOKING MORE CLOSELY, TO HIS SURPRISE, HE DISCOVERED THAT FOR SOME STRANGE REASON, THE ANIMAL HAD NO LEGS. MAHMOUD WAS INTRIGUED. HE ASKED HIMSELF QUESTIONS.

– HOW DOES THIS FOX MANAGE TO FEED ITSELF? HOW CAN IT CATCH ANY GAME? DETERMINED TO GET TO THE BOTTOM OF THE ISSUE, HE SETTLED THERE AND KEPT WATCH. SHORTLY AFTER, CLOSE BY, A BEAR FELL ON A GAZELLE AND DEVoured IT LOUDLY, THEN LEFT, ABANDONING THE CARCASS. WHEN THE WAY WAS FREE, THE FOX CAME OUT OF THE BUSH, CRAWLED TO THE CARRION TO NIBBLE ON THE REMAINS.

– WELL HERE! EXULTED MAHMOUD, HERE IS A FINE LESSON, VERY EASY TO UNDERSTAND! SURE TO HAVE ENCOUNTERED THE ANSWER TO HIS QUESTIONS, HE LEFT THE FOREST, DECIDED TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THIS GREAT LIFE LESSON.

TWO YEARS LATER, A STARVING BEGGAR KNOCKED AT THE DOOR OF THE SUFI SAGE. AFTER A MOMENT OF UNCERTAINTY, THE MAN RECOGNIZED UNDER THE RAGS A FILTHY AND EMACIATED MAHMOUD, WHO HAD CLEARLY SUFFERED AND PHYSICALLY CHANGED. EXHAUSTED, THE MAN COMPLAINED BITTERLY.

– I TOOK YOUR ADVICE, BUT IT DID NOT WORK. I FOLLOWED THE EXAMPLE OF NATURE, BUT IT GAVE ME A VERY BAD LESSON, HE MOANED. I TRIED WHAT YOU SAID, BUT IT DID NOT WORK. LOOK AT ME YOU WILL UNDERSTAND HOW MUCH I SUFFERED.

– BUT WHAT HAPPENED? ASKED THE SAGE.

– I WENT INTO THE FOREST TO OBSERVE NATURE, AS YOU HAD RECOMMENDED TO ME. I SAW A FOX WITH NO LEGS THAT NEVERTHELESS LACKED NOTHING. THINGS SEEMED TO GET TO HIM IN THE MOST NATURAL WAY. SO I TOO SAT WAITING PATIENTLY: I TRUSTED NATURE, I WAS HOPING THINGS WOULD HAPPEN BY THEMSELVES. I STOOD BY EXACTLY LIKE THE FOX, BUT NOTHING GOOD EVER HAPPENED TO ME. NOW, HERE I AM, POOR, SICK AND DESTITUTE. THE WORLD IS REALLY MERCILESS!

THE SAGE NODDED KNOWINGLY.

– MY DEAR MAHMOUD! THE LESSON WAS PERFECT, FROM WHAT YOU DESCRIBE, BUT I FEAR

THE STUDENT IS SLIGHTLY SIMPLEMINDED. YOU WHO HAVE LEGS, WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO IMITATE THE FOX? YOUR MODEL WAS THE BEAR! HELP YOURSELF WITH ATTRIBUTES THAT NATURE GAVE YOU! THIS WAY YOU COULD FEED YOURSELF YOU COULD AS WELL FEED THE WEAK.

Indecision

Mahmoud is a waverer. He lacks confidence, because it seems to him that everything he undertakes fails. To varying degrees, what is described here is a very common problem: the one of indecision. People afflicted by this difficulty want to achieve many goals, but do not actually succeed in doing it. And every time they decide, doubt invades them.

They do not know how to center themselves, to channel themselves. They want to be sure that they have made the right choice, rather than committing themselves: they do not understand the arbitrary dimension of the paths of existence. They ignore that it is not so much about doing the "right thing", but about "doing right" what we are doing, whatever it is.

Thus they end up abandoning their projects, by weariness, easily discouraged by the first difficulty to come along. This reinforces and justifies their feeling of impotence. Risk-taking costs these people: they cannot stand the obstacle or the failure. They are afflicted with a kind of infantile personality where everything must succeed immediately, the pain of uncertainty is unlivable to them, especially if they have to continue to act during this time. They get irritated, discouraged, interrupt and complain.

Doubt

Doubt does not feed. When it affects us, it paralyzes us. This is the reason why René Descartes, who nevertheless presents doubt as an instrument of critical thinking, also proposes what he calls "provisional moral". Doubt is useful if it is methodological, if we can formulate concrete reasons for doubting, which we can analyze, which we can answer, which we can refute by other arguments. Otherwise it is purely psychological doubt, a sort of compulsive, uninteresting and counterproductive uncertainty. He warns us against this doubt, which he calls hyperbolic, because of its excessive nature. This one no longer allows us to judge anything; reality eventually fades. As a way out of eternal procrastination, he offers us the "provisional moral", which consists of taking a path, whatever it is, sticking to it as long as possible, unless we find a valid reason to change it. This "moral" establishes a work hypothesis, to which we commit ourselves for lack of certainty, at best, as long as we remain open to criticism and other options.

Mahmoud, for lack of provisional morals, unable to make a choice and to stick to it, makes another decision: to seek the advice of an expert, a Sufi sage. The latter listens for a moment to Mahmoud, the time to understand his dismay and the degree of his impotence, but he prefers to shorten the expression of the complaint. He bursts into subjectivity with an objective principle of reality: nature. Everything is there, all that remains is to observe. This is a way of telling Mahmoud that he complicates his life for nothing, that he drowns in a glass of water because he listens to himself too much.

Complacency

Mahmoud, lost, was probably waiting for a word of authority to emerge from his doldrums. This word refers to an indisputable and all-powerful reality: nature. Too happy to find certainty, he hastens to comply. Now what does Mahmoud meet? A handicapped fox who is well off despite its fate, because providence meets all its needs. Mahmoud quickly identifies with this disabled animal: he is almost reassured. Impotence is here justified, even rewarded, since there is little need to satisfy one's own necessities. Just expect, be patient, everything happens. No wonder Mahmoud immediately rushes to follow this "lesson" which suits him. And like all indecisive people, once he has made a "big" decision, he never lets go: whatever happens, he clings and persists, without questioning himself anymore. Even though he can no longer feed himself and begins to wither, he is unable to rethink his hypothesis: he prefers to brace himself fearfully in his position rather than face again the pangs provoked by the uncertainty of the decision making. And he pays the consequences, through the degradation and decline of his body, probably of his mind.

Grow

The explanation he gives to the sage who questions him about his appearance reveals his mental state. He had "confidence", he "hoped", he "waited"... just like the first time, Mahmoud laments over his fate. Except now he has even better reasons to complain: he is a victim, the victims are always right! He obeyed, he followed the advice of the master, those of nature he was shamefully betrayed.

Obviously, the sage, who understood Mahmoud's problem, shows him the ridiculousness of his situation, caused by the absurdity of his decision. Why did he choose the model of the invalid? Why is he so keen on portraying himself as a victim, rather than a vigorous actor, who takes responsibility for himself? So why is Mahmoud afraid to exist? At the same time, in an allusive way, without hoping too much that his interlocutor will understand, the sage offers him a key: you are too centered on yourself, you must learn to grow by thinking of others. Others exist, with their own needs and difficulties. Perhaps this was a necessary step for Mahmoud. After all, the master can hope: the story may not be over, since the name Mahmoud means "the one who deserves praise." Unless this name is an irony from the author. History does not say whether Mahmoud will succeed in becoming an adult.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why does Mahmoud not manage to find his way in life?
- What conception Mahmoud has of himself?
- Is Mahmoud a good observer?
- Why does Mahmoud choose the path of the fox rather than the path of the bear?
- Is Mahmoud of a trusting nature?
- Was the sage right to propose to Mahmoud the lessons of nature?

- Does Mahmoud understand the sage's advice?
- Why does the sage call Mahmoud "simpleminded"?
- What is the main problem of Mahmoud?
- Has Mahmoud learned anything throughout the story?

Reflection

- ★ Is nature a reliable master?
- ★ Should we believe in providence?
- ★ Why do we like to complain?
- ★ Why is it often difficult to choose?
- ★ Is the desire for perfection a good guide in life?
- ★ Do we learn only what suits us?
- ★ Is the world ruthless?
- ★ Is passivity necessarily a defect?
- ★ Is it right or wrong to doubt?
- ★ Is it true, as Hegel says, that "the fear of error is the first error"?

Chapter 12 The droppings

Is the difference a problem for us?

ONE DAY, RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE MARKETPLACE, BETWEEN THE SPICES AND THE PERFUMES, A MAN SUDDENLY COLLAPSED. HE HAD NO MORE STRENGTH IN THE LEGS. HIS HEAD WAS SPINNING, HE WAS VISIBLY BOTHERED BY THE SMELL OF INCENSE BURNED BY THE MERCHANTS. ONLOOKERS RUSHED TO HELP HIM. SOME MASSAGED HIS HEART OR HIS ARMS. A WOMAN Poured some rose water on his face, thinking it would strengthen him and put him back on his feet. During that time, others still were trying to remove his clothes so he could breathe. Then a well-dressed man, obviously versed in medical science, bent over to take his pulse, then suggested to just leave him alone and patiently wait. All around him, discussions were underway. Some diagnosed him with drinking abuse or an excess of hashish, others opted for lack of water or food, or simply attributed the discomfort to the ambient heat. Each explained the situation to his neighbor from his own experience: they all told how this had happened to them personally, or what they had observed in their families. But finally, in all this brouhaha, no cure functioned, the man still lay unconscious. The brother of the man was a tanner, who kept a shop a little further, along with his brother. He quickly learned what had happened as soon as he heard the news, he ran to the market, while picking up on his way the dog droppings he could find. Arrived on the scene of the tragedy, he pushed his way through the crowd, yelling:

– LET ME GET THROUGH! I KNOW WHAT TO DO. I KNOW THE CAUSE OF HIS ILLNESS! HIDING WELL HIS "MEDICINE", WHICH COULD PROVOKE AVERSIVE REACTIONS, THE MAN CAME UP TO HIS BROTHER LEANED OVER AS IF TO WHISPER A SECRET IN HIS EAR. MEANWHILE, QUIETLY, HE PUT HIS HAND UNDER HIS NOSE. BREATHING IN THE SCENT OF WHAT WAS IN THAT HAND, THE INVALID IMMEDIATELY WOKE UP AND RECOVERED. THE OBSERVERS WERE ASTONISHED. THEY SUSPECTED SOME MAGICAL POWER. ONE OF THEM EXCLAIMED:

– THIS MAN HAS A POWERFUL BREATH. HE MANAGES TO WAKE UP THE DEAD!

FINALLY, THE MAN GOT UP AND LEFT WITH HIS BROTHER, AS IF NOTHING HAD HAPPENED.

Common sense

What is good, pleasant or healthy for some is not necessarily good for others. A difference that is not always easy to understand or admit, especially when the majority agrees on a given point. This opinion becomes an established certitude, since it comes under common sense.

It is not obvious that a person could be annoyed by the "good smells" that emanate from the spice and perfume market. Even more, it seems very strange when these smells bother to the point of being in pain and fainting. Yet this is what happens to the hero of our story who collapses in the middle of the market. Of course, as usual, such an event attracts both goodwill and curiosity. We are fascinated by these borderline situations which refer to the finitude of being, attractive and repulsive. We want to both act on them and contemplate them, based on our temperament or circumstances.

Thus, several people try to act on the poor patient, while others observe and comment. Those who act, driven by their goodwill, do so according to their current capacities and intuitions, however limited they may be. An "expert", a little wiser than average, nevertheless declares his powerlessness and recommends patience. Alas, all these good people cannot understand what is happening to this man, since his functioning escapes common sense.

Good intentions

This woman who bathes the patient's face with rose water, without being able to imagine the consequences, contributes to the disease that affects him, since it is precisely the "good smells" that pose a problem for our man. We can think of the ancient proverb: "The path to hell is paved with good intentions". It is often interpreted as a critique of intentions that are not followed by action. But even more, it seems to criticize the "good conscience" acting, the "sincerity" which operates "for the good", without the slightest scruple or ulterior motive, this "goodwill" which struggles "for others", without doubting the least. We can also think here of Nietzsche's sentence: "Many things repel me in good people. I am not talking about the evil that is in them." A good conscience makes us do the worst things, precisely because it is blind and terribly complacent. Others do not exist for her: others exist only as a pretext for self-deployment. Wonderful rose water, universally appreciated! How could this brave lady imagine that her scents constitute a real poison for our tanner!

Stranger and disgust

All around, the "actors", the "commentators" are going well: certitudes abound. For the latter, the patient does not exist much: he is only the object of their curiosity, that is to say, a simple foil that allows them to implement the infantilism of the "me too". The situation is just a pretext for giving your opinion, telling anecdotes and talking about yourself. Some do not hesitate to wrongly accuse the poor patient. Definitely, the other no longer exists as a being in himself, he is only almost nothing. The foreigner, the one who is ignored and who behaves strangely, no longer has any dignity, he deserves no respect.

Fortunately, this man has a brother, a tanner like him. There is at least one person for whom the patient is a person, a singular being, endowed with an existence of his own not a thing. On the other hand, since he is his brother and they do the same job, one knows the other.

It should be noted that tanneries are traditionally located a little away from other stalls on the market, for a very specific reason: the pestilential smell that characterizes their activity. The odors come on the one hand from the purification of the flesh, of which it is a question of getting rid on the other hand from various corrosive products used to carry out this process.

As soon as he learns what happened, the brother understands what made his brother sick: the "good smells". He rushes over and collects dog droppings. Of course, he cannot show this to the "others", those who prefer "good" smells. Conversely, his brother, accustomed to fetid miasms, odors of rotting, atmosphere of decomposition, cannot stand the fumes of incense and other "delicate" perfumes, which make him faint. So he pretends to talk to his brother, making him breathe the scent of excrement, which immediately brings him back to his senses.

Nature and culture

There are two ways of looking at the problem of "rejection". From the point of view of "good smells" and that of "excrements". In the first perspective, we can refer to the Bible quotes: "It happened to them what a true proverb says: The dog has returned to what he had vomited the washed sow wallowed in the quagmire", or "As the dog returns to what he vomited, the madman repeats his madness". In this case, the patient is sick because he cannot stand the good or the right.

This story indicates that it is difficult to get someone out of the "quagmire" of his "bad" habits. Some versions of the present story take this bias. The cause of all diseases is the breakdown of habits. And the remedy is to find them. Thus, the one who wallows in the mire cannot stand the clear water, the liar cannot stand the truth, the wicked cannot stand justice, etc.

But it seems to us that such an analysis ignores another possibility, even more promising, which criticizes the established opinion as well as the hypocrisy which characterizes it— the "socially correct", the established moral. Let us recall here what the chroniclers say about the court of Louis XIV: one did not wash, but one perfumed oneself to hide the bad smells. Perhaps in our tanners, there is precisely a principle of reality that the "well-smelling" prefer to ignore. The lie of perfume would therefore be unlivable to those men who do not fear reality, however organic and impure it may be. And those who swim in this "collective lie" cannot imagine that their "perfume" represents an unbearable stench to others. To understand this problem, one can observe how "culture", "intellectualism" or "style" can periodically be used to justify the most simplistic behaviors or the most nauseating ideas. It is only a question of aestheticizing the real, of making a beautiful image, of smelling good, of wearing make-up, of showing oneself in one's best finery. From this perspective, we hide the other side of the scene to show only appearances. This eliminates finitude, for example, of bodily processes, which are too dirty. Taboos surprise us or shock us only in others, when they are not ours. In this sense, tanners represent the acceptance of the reality of the world, without pretending to be anything other than who they are, without hiding from themselves. Nevertheless, one can also criticize these people, for their simplistic and uneducated nature. Does culture beautify nature by sublimating it, or does it shamefully hide a nature that it cannot stand?

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why did people rush when the man fainted?
- Do people really care about the person that fainted?
- What do smells symbolize in this story?
- Why would it be better to do nothing for the patient?
- Why do all these people want to comment on the situation?
- Why does the brother prefer to hide what he does?
- What does the tanner represent in this story?
- Why would the droppings arouse "aversive reactions"?

- Why do observers speak of "magic"?
- What does this story teach us?

Reflection

- ★ Why do we want to help others?
- ★ Why does drama attract attention?
- ★ What engenders disgust?
- ★ Can the "good" hurt us?
- ★ Why is it said, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions"?
- ★ Why do we like to comment on what happens?
- ★ Why must we hide certain things that are common to all?
- ★ Do we need to explain everything?
- ★ Can differences make us uncomfortable?
- ★ Must we always rely on our experience?

Chapter 13 The owner and the beggar

Is moral universal?

A BEGGAR PASSED THROUGH A VILLAGE, GOING FROM DOOR TO DOOR, BEGGING FOR SOME LIVELIHOOD. ARRIVING AT A STATELY HOME, HE KNOCKED AT THE DOOR. THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE OPENED AND ASKED GRUFFLY WHAT HE WANTED. THE BEGGAR EXPOSED HIS MISERY AND ASKED IF IT WAS POSSIBLE TO GIVE HIM A PIECE OF BREAD, EVEN STALE, TO EAT. THE IRRITATED MAN SAID:

– DO YOU WANT BREAD? TELL ME, DOES THIS HOUSE LOOK LIKE A BAKERY?

THE BEGGAR INSISTED.

– DO YOU HAVE SOME FRUIT, EVEN DAMAGED?

– THIS HOUSE IS NOT A GROCERY STORE.

– OR A PIECE OF MEAT?

– WE AREN'T A BUTCHER OR A SLAUGHTERHOUSE!

– AND A GLASS OF WATER? YOU HAVE A GLASS OF WATER, RIGHT?

– DO YOU SEE ANY RIVER HERE?

– COULD I THEN AT LEAST REST A WHILE IN YOUR GARDEN?

ANGRY, THE MAN REPLIED:

– OF COURSE, IT IS A HOSTEL, WHERE EVERYONE CAN TAKE SHELTER AT WILL! GO AWAY! LEAVE THE PREMISES! THERE IS NOTHING FOR YOU HERE!

THUS, EACH REQUEST FROM THE BEGGAR WAS REJECTED IN AN IDENTICAL MANNER. SUDDENLY, THE MAN PULLED DOWN HIS PANTS AND DEFECATED ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE HOUSE.

– WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE! EXCLAIMED THE OWNER, FRIGHTENED AND SHOCKED.

– I WAS LOOKING FOR A SUITABLE PLACE TO DEFECATE, THE MAN REPLIED, STILL SQUATTING, I FINALLY FOUND IT. IN THIS HOUSE, THERE IS NOTHING TO EAT OR DRINK, ONE CANNOT EVEN REST. IT IS A COMPLETE RUIN, TOTALLY EMPTY, NO ONE COULD LIVE THERE! SUCH A PLACE CAN OBVIOUSLY SERVE ONLY AS A CESSPOOL.

Others

Others, it is the otherness, the one who is not me, but who is nevertheless my fellow, another me, an “alter ego”. In others, the dialectical relationship of identity and difference is intertwined, a paradox which obviously poses a problem. The classical concept, especially Christian, of “neighbor” captures the same problem: the one who is not me but who nevertheless is close, because he is “the closest” (from the Latin *roximus*); in that sense, he’s almost part of me. Others cannot therefore be a real stranger to me.

Depending on people, cultures and other parameters, the importance of others varies, even is radically opposed. It is this fundamental divergence that we observe in the dialogue of the deaf between the beggar and the owner. For the former, the other is everyone: thus, every human being must help a congener who is in need. The one who refuses to share, manifesting in such a crass way his lack of generosity, would in fact lose his humanity: he would be a brute, an animal, an almost nothing deprived of all dignity. This is what the beggar expresses by

ostentatiously defecating on the threshold of the house. And when he says “there is nothing at all, no one could live there”, he is actually condemning the master of the place, who is not worthy of his own humanity. In a way, such a man is merely an excrement, a scoria of existence.

The problem of others can certainly be interpreted as a moral issue, that is to say through the stake of good and evil. But it can also be thought of as an identity problem. From the Sufi perspective, which invites the finite subject to fit into the infinity, to refuse the link to others, not to fit into the otherness, amounts to reducing his existence to nullity. By limiting the extent of his being, both temporally, spatially or identically, the subject does not accord himself with his own human nature, which in fact is of divine essence. The relationship to others is the opportunity offered to us to grow, by extracting ourselves from a childish egocentric state thus to acquire our own humanity, to really become ourselves. To love one’s neighbour as oneself, is the embodiment of the divine.

Property

Two characters clash in this story, who represent two archetypes: the beggar and the owner. There is a non-accidental semantic relationship between "property" and "cleanliness". These two words come from the Latin *proprius* (for the private, for oneself) which indicates what is special, apart, what is not common, what cannot be shared. It is therefore about what we own: "property" in the sense of physical goods and what is characteristic. From this, we draw what is specific to the moral or physical sense, what is appropriate in the cognitive or moral sense, and the reference to what we possess. What is "proper" is good, what is "improper" is "bad".

The owner is clean, while the beggar is rather repulsive. Owners feel threatened in two ways. On the one hand, on a practical level, because they are the ones whom the beggar will target, when he wants to seek help or charity. But the owners do not want to lose anything. On the other hand, they are morally disturbed. Still they may feel guilty when refusing a request for help. Indeed, the criteria of social success that the owners represent are undermined by those who represent the opposing values of destitution, at least in appearance. Especially since the owners suspect— probably rightly— that some beggars deliberately choose this way of life. They are therefore disgusting not only in their way of presenting, dirty, stinking, ragged and miserable, but also in their existential values, considered immoral, antisocial, cynical, indecent or shameful. Therefore owners do not want to approach beggars either near or far.

But the beggar of this story, like any beggar perhaps, is a master. He shows to this possessor how his possessions, in fact, possess him. Like a person possessed by evil, he is no longer himself. First, we can observe an unjustified aggressiveness that shows an almost pathological fear, an excessive horror. The owner could simply answer "no" to the requests, or give some food or a glass of water that would cost him nothing. But he cannot— that would be too much to ask him. This story shows us the fragility of what often constitutes human identity.

Scandal

The master of the place is taken aback by the beggar’s outrageous behavior. "Woe to the one by whom scandal happens", proclaim the Gospels. The term scandal comes from the Greek *skandalon*, which means "pebble", that is to say the stumbling block, which makes trip. Scandal is therefore what deviates from the right path, what diverts from the good, what breaks with

morals. Over time, the scandal has also become a reaction to what does not comply with custom, to what contradicts current standards.

More generally, this means a strong, virulent and emotional reaction. The moral sense of the scandalized person is exacerbated, is strongly stimulated and revitalized by the events it condemns. Paradoxically, the "scandalized", if he feels disgust or hatred, at the same time feels a certain pleasure: that of being on the right side; he savors the intense pleasure of good conscience. We encounter here a moral catharsis, as if by scandalizing ourselves we were purifying ourselves. We can therefore understand that the owner, seeing the beggar defecating in front of his door, is more than willing to be scandalized; he is almost relieved: this gesture confirms for him the dubious quality of a man sufficiently unworthy to beg for his food.

Nevertheless, the Gospels also affirm that "it is impossible that no scandal happens" and Christ himself declares scandalizing and dividing the common opinion. Thus, in this imperfect world, not only is it impossible, but it may be even necessary to scandalize. And then, if we look at things from the beggar's perspective, the scandal changes sides. It is the owner's behavior that is scandalous, driven by miserable selfishness. Faced with this scandal, against which one cannot reason so it is mean and nasty, the beggar offers another scandal, in order to show his interlocutor the absurdity of his behavior. But if the first scandal is that of reason which resigns, which refuses its own evidence, the second is the expression of reason which rises up, which cannot accept the indigence of what is presented to it.

True morals and false morals

Morality is the set of rules of conduct intended to accomplish good and avoid evil. Thus, implicitly or explicitly, certain principles will govern our actions that we would have defined in advance or will be defined through our actions. Some decisions will be allowed or encouraged, others prohibited. Theoretically, the rules and principles thus stated, if they are substantial, will be held universally and unconditionally applicable and valid, even though it will never be the case in reality. A moral is never more than a regulatory ideal, in the sense in which Kant uses it; that is to say the statement or description of an ideal way of being human behavior, both the goal, the reason for being, the intention or the purpose of our actions. Even though it concerns the way we act on a daily basis, it is above all an absolute, a desirable ideal, but unachievable, or even sometimes clearly undefinable.

"True morals do not care about morals". When Pascal opposes these "two" morals, one can think that he wishes to criticize a moral made up of established social rules, based on minimum standards of propriety, where the dignity is well respected, which produces a "good" conscience, what one could describe as bourgeois moral, or egocentric. He thus favors a moral that comes within gift, generosity, otherness, abandonment. It must be recognized that the former is clearer, more functional: it is the one that comes into force in social relations. The second operates rather within the family, where love reigns in principle. However, this moral is already difficult to apply within the family: it becomes senseless at the level of society.

It is from the point of view of this "conventional" moral that the owner considers the beggar as immoral: he does not work to earn a living, he does not respect himself since he demeans himself to beg, he does not respect private property, in short, he is a "good for nothing". On the other hand, the beggar considers the owner to be immoral, because he is too attached

to material goods, he has no compassion, he is selfish, he does not love his neighbor, he is xenophobic, etc. He gives him only what he deserves: he gives him back his "good".

Another way to distinguish these two morals is to define the former as a moral of reciprocity, more calculating, the second as a moral of gift, or gratuity. Eternal debate between reason and heart. The first is more comfortable, the second is more demanding, since it requires an ability to detach and abandon, psychologically and existentially harder; it involves putting really oneself to the test. It is up to everyone to determine the possibility and the legitimacy of these two morals.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why does the owner right away receive the beggar badly?
- Why does the owner concede nothing to the beggar?
- Why does the owner use questions as a response?
- What is common to the various arguments of the owner?
- Does the beggar change his personality in the story?
- Where does the scandal in this story come from?
- Why does the beggar defecate on the threshold of the house?
- What is the nature of the moral conflict between the two men?
- What is the logic of the beggar?
- How are the beggar and the owner similar?

Reflection

- ★ Why do we love so much to possess?
- ★ What is the use of sarcasm?
- ★ Why are beggars despised?
- ★ Why does dirt scare us?
- ★ Why are others a threat?
- ★ Should the scandal necessarily cause a drama?
- ★ Should we only respect those who respect us?
- ★ Do we have to be generous?
- ★ Should morals be universal in order to be "real" morals?
- ★ Are moral rules a necessity?

Chapter 14 The man who got angry

Is there a reason for our faults?

THERE WAS A MAN WHO WAS OFTEN GETTING ANGRY, IN A VIOLENT WAY. AFTER SEVERAL YEARS, HE FINALLY REALIZED THIS INCLINATION WAS MAKING HIS LIFE DIFFICULT. NOT KNOWING WHAT TO DO, HE STARTED LOOKING FOR SOMEONE WHO COULD GIVE HIM ADVICE. HE HEARD PEOPLE SPEAKING ABOUT A DERVISH OF GREAT WISDOM AND DECIDED TO VISIT HIM. HE TOOK HIS BAGGAGE AND GUN AND SET OFF ON THE JOURNEY. AFTER SEVERAL DAYS OF TRAVELING, HE ARRIVED AT THE PLACE WHERE THIS WISE MAN LIVED. AFTER LISTENING TO THE VISITOR FOR A LONG TIME, THE DERVISH SAID:

– GO TO THE DESERTED CROSSROADS THAT I WILL INDICATE TO YOU. THERE YOU WILL SEE AN OLD DRY TREE. INSTALL YOURSELF UNDER ITS BRANCHES AND OFFER WATER TO EVERY PERSON WHO WILL PASS BY SO THEY COULD QUENCH THEIR THIRST. THE ANGRY MAN OBEYED AND WENT TO THE INDICATED CROSSROADS. HE INSTALLED HIMSELF UNDER THE TREE AND STARTED PROPOSING WATER TO OCCASIONAL TRAVELERS PASSING BY. TIME PASSED AND, IN THE AREA, HE ACQUIRED THE REPUTATION OF AN ASCETIC WHO WAS LIVING IN SEVERE DISCIPLINE, PRACTICING CHARITY, BEING THE DISCIPLE OF A GREAT TEACHER AND A MASTER OF HIMSELF. ONE DAY, A MAN WHO WAS VISIBLY IN A RUSH, PASSED BY THE DESERTED PLACE AND DID NOT EVEN RESPOND AT ALL WHEN HE WAS OFFERED A GLASS OF WATER TO QUENCH HIS THIRST. WHEN HE WAS CALLED UPON, HE TURNED HIS HEAD AND CONTINUED WALKING AS IF NOTHING HAD HAPPENED. PROVOKED, THE MAN WHO WAS EASILY GETTING ANGRY INSISTED AND REPEATED HIS PROPOSAL SEVERAL TIMES.

– TAKE A BIT OF THE WATER I OFFER TO ALL THE TRAVELERS THAT PASS THIS CROSSROADS! SINCE THE PASSER-BY CONTINUED TO GO HIS WAY, THE ASCETIC GOT REALLY ANGRY AND SHOUTED IN HIS DIRECTION:

– AT LEAST YOU COULD HAVE THANKED ME!

BUT THE OTHER ONE DID NOT EVEN TURN HIS HEAD.

COMPLETELY OUTRAGED WITH SUCH BEHAVIOR, HE COULD NOT TAKE IT ANYMORE. FORGETTING ALL THE WORK ON HIMSELF, ASCETIC DISCIPLINE AND SELF-CONTROL, THE MAN GRABBED HIS GUN HANGING ALL THIS TIME ON A BRANCH OF THE DRY TREE, POINTED IT AT THE INCONSIDERATE TRAVELER AND SHOT. THE MAN FELL DEAD. SEEING THE CONSEQUENCE OF HIS GESTURE, THE ANGRY MAN DESPAIRED. BUT AT THAT MOMENT, AS IF BY A MIRACLE, FLOWERS BLOSSOMED ON THE DEAD TREE.

LATER ON, HE LEARNED THAT THE MAN HE HAD KILLED WAS HIMSELF A KILLER WHO WAS RUSHING TO COMMIT ANOTHER MURDER AFTER A LONG SERIES OF HORRIBLE CRIMES.

Anger

Why are we getting angry? Because the order of the world does not meet our expectations and we do not bear this lag. This denotes a kind of hypersensitivity in the subject affected by such a functioning therefore suffering. Nevertheless, it is because of the acts that such a dizzy spell leads to, and their consequences, that people who are subject to these outbursts are concerned about their affliction. Sadness is the depressive face of anger, the one where we become aware. Anger is the manic face of sadness, the one where we are carried away.

When we have a behavioral problem and we decide to consult a specialist in this area, we expect some recommendations or advice that will allow us to deal with the problem. This is apparently what is happening in this story. The wise man proposes a rather radical solution, but our angry hero must be desperate enough to comply with this injunction. The pain that afflicts him and the absurdity of his existence must lead to such ill-being that it is not possible to envisage any alternative but to comply.

Since our man gets angry in his relationships with others, it is better to isolate him so that he finds a calm of the mind in solitude. On the other hand, he must reduce his practical activities to the minimum, confining them to simple gestures, because again, it is through the multiplicity of actions of all kinds that one finds a way to get carried away by the confrontation between desire and frustration. Hyperactivity is the mother of irritation. Undertaking nothing or little, being in front of ourselves, would allow us to regain a certain calm.

Self-control

The activity proposed by the master is simple. Moreover it implies a certain humility and generosity. This moral requirement involves a great deal of work on oneself, for the angry man is a kind of proud, egocentric person: his vision of things seems to him the most legitimate; the whole world must satisfy his demands. Now, rather than pretending to be satisfied by others, he must instead seek to satisfy others. To do this, his impatience must turn into patience, in this place where almost nothing happens.

We realize how radical the proposed lifestyle change is, how such an exercise over time is supposed to treat the problem that afflicts our man.

At first glance, it is a question of desensitizing the patient, of getting used to not expecting anything more from what could lead to disappointment, irritation and outburst therefore reassuring him. And history tells us that he is doing pretty well in this exercise. So much so that he becomes a kind of celebrity: a reputable ascetic, a wise man. It is easy to accept the idea that, through the slow acquisition of self-control, this man is happier, having opted for a rare and difficult choice, as much as necessary.

Mirror

The narration could therefore end there, with this moral lesson, simple and uplifting, but this is not what it is about: the truth is elsewhere. Thus the real challenge arises: providence puts on the path of "the angry man" a very particular individual, a being who has nothing to do with the generosity of others, a character who has nothing but contempt for simplicity and humility. This is what we can call a man in a hurry: one who knows only his desire and his will. The idea is pleasant to think that at this point, the man who often gets angry meets his own ghost, the demon that inhabits him and he kills him. In its ultimate aspect, anger finds here its culmination and reality: a form of symbolic suicide.

So this meeting is unbearable for our hero, it makes him almost crazy. The fact that one refuses his offering, without even thanking him or even acknowledging his existence, seems to him to be such a denial of his being, of the new image he has forged, that he cannot accept it. Our "old" angry man finds "his roots." One can imagine the despair in this man who, after years of working on himself, meets consequences even more tragic than he had ever known! Now he

has become a murderer, because of his anger! One could not describe a more absurd and cruel personal situation. He has not changed: he is "the angry man" for eternity. The world is a big mirror, in which we find ourselves endlessly.

Inner links

It is in this extreme situation that the real lesson arises, the previous one being only a game of appearances. Indeed, while we seem to have hit rock bottom, caused disaster and created desolation, a miracle is taking place. The tree is revived, to signify that a positive gesture has been made, a source of life. We understand better at this moment the symbolism of the parched tree, which represents desolation, but also therefore hope and rebirth. By isolating himself from the world, the man could change the external circumstances of his anger. But there is a lie here, which "the meeting" will expose. The artifice will be revealed, the being then appears and takes on meaning. Anger is a reality that has its justification.

We find the true dimension of the Sufi concept of "inner links" which weave a web throughout the universe. The man learns that his act of extreme anger is ultimately beneficial to humanity. What he saw as his own annihilation is in fact exactly the opposite: it represents the reconciliation of his being with himself. It was therefore illusory to think that he had changed, he was basically only trying to escape from himself. It is necessary to experience alienation, to finally become oneself and to reconcile with one's own nature. The experience of the inner links allows us to discover the meaning of our existence, discovering how this finitude fits into the totality or completeness of the world. So we can reconcile ourselves with who we are, especially with what we are not.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why did the anger of the man make his life difficult?
- Why did the dervish send the man to the deserted crossroads?
- Why does the man have to give water to the passers-by?
- Why does the man obey the dervish?
- Did the man learn something in the deserted place?
- Why does the man get angry when his offer is ignored?
- Why does anger lead to murder?
- Why does the murder make the flowers blossom?
- What is the lesson of this story?
- Is there some similarity between the two protagonists of the story?

Reflection

- ★ Does anger have a reason to be?
- ★ Does getting angry depend on oneself or on others?
- ★ Is it better to experience your flaws till the end or correct them?
- ★ Why is it difficult for us to accept who we are?

- ★ Can we really change?
- ★ What are the means for learning to master oneself?
- ★ Is mastering oneself possible and desirable?
- ★ Are the others our own mirror?
- ★ Does immanent justice exist?
- ★ Does everything that exists have meaning?

Chapter 15 The old chest

Should we always know?

THERE ONCE WAS A MAN RESPECTED BY ALL, FOR HE WAS THOUGHTFUL AND LED A BALANCED LIFE. NEVERTHELESS, HE GOT MARRIED LATE, TO A MUCH YOUNGER WOMAN. ONE EVENING HE RETURNED HOME LATER THAN USUAL AND HIS FAITHFUL SERVANT WELCOMED HIM IN AN UNUSUAL WAY.

– OUR MISTRESS, YOUR WIFE, IS BEHAVING STRANGELY THIS EVENING. SHE BROUGHT THE LARGE COFFER THAT BELONGED TO YOUR GRANDMOTHER TO HER ROOM, WHICH NORMALLY CONTAINS SOME ANCIENT EMBROIDERY, BUT I'M SURE THAT NOW ONE CAN FIND SOMETHING DIFFERENT IN IT. SHE REFUSED TO LET ME LOOK INSIDE, EVEN ME, YOUR OLDEST SERVANT! AND NOW, SHE FORBIDS ANYONE TO ENTER HER ROOM. HEARING THIS, THE MAN WENT TO SEE HIS WIFE, FOLLOWED BY HIS FAITHFUL SERVANT. WHEN HE ENTERED, HE FOUND HER SITTING NEXT TO A LARGE COFFER IN SOLID WOOD, LOOKING WORRIED. AFTER GREETING HER, HE ASKED HIS BELOVED TO LIFT THE COVER IN ORDER TO SHOW WHAT THE COFFER CONTAINED. THE WOMAN REPLIED:

– IS IT BECAUSE OF THE SUSPICIONS OF YOUR SERVANT THAT YOU ARE ASKING ME THIS? DO YOU NOT TRUST ME?

– WOULD IT NOT BE EASIER TO CUT SHORT ALL THE RUMORS BY SIMPLY OPENING THE COFFER? REPLIED THE HUSBAND.

BUT THE WOMAN RETORTED:

– I DO NOT THINK THAT IS POSSIBLE.

– WHY NOT? IS IT LOCKED?

– YES, THAT'S RIGHT.

– SO, WHERE'S THE KEY?

THE WOMAN SHOWED HIM THE KEY AND SAID:

– SEND THE SERVANT AWAY. I WILL GIVE YOU THE KEY. THE MAN SENT HIM AWAY AND THE WOMAN TIMIDLY HANDED OVER THE KEY. THEN SHE LEFT THE ROOM, VISIBLY TROUBLED. ONCE ALONE, THE MAN SAT DOWN BY THE COFFER AND BEGAN TO THINK, WHILE GENTLY PLAYING WITH THE KEY. HE REMAINED THERE FOR A LONG TIME. LATER ON THAT NIGHT, HE SENT FOR THE GARDENERS WORKING FOR HIM. HE ASKED THEM TO LIFT THE COFFER AND TAKE IT TO A SPECIFIC LOCATION, AWAY FROM THE PROPERTY. FOLLOWING HIS INSTRUCTIONS, THEY DUG A DEEP HOLE AND BURIED THE COFFER THERE. HE WATCHED THEM, THEN RETURNED HOME. THE INCIDENT WAS CLOSED; IT WAS NEVER MENTIONED THEREAFTER.

Wisdom and weakness

It is through our weakness that we have the opportunity to be wise, otherwise wisdom would have no reason to be: it would be too easy and meaningless. So it is for the man of this story, who apparently is a wise man, as shown by his levelheaded life, his thoughtful side and the respect accorded to him. Nevertheless, he awaits the special opportunity to show what his wisdom really is; it will occur thanks to the only apparent disorder of his existence, so to speak,

his weakness. He married a woman much younger than him. It is through this way that the drama will appear and the challenge will occur.

What does this age difference tell us about him and his wife? There is something abnormal in such a situation, sufficiently to be specifically mentioned, from the beginning of the story, among the few details about this man's life. When we observe such a couple, we wonder about its incongruity. Is this situation unnatural? Enough for us to think that the young woman was forced into this unseemly marriage, or that she was driven by rather dubious motivations, such as the lure of profit, or a psychological imbalance that led to seeking a father figure. As for man, we can imagine various criticisms: rejection of his own age and his own identity, fear of the decrepitude of his own body, fear of old age and death, desire for omnipotence and control, excessive quest for recognition and admiration, inability to love, desire for lust and vice, etc.

We can also interpret this age gap in a less literal and psychological way. We could read, for example, the gap between the wisdom of a man and the banal reality of the world, a reality that one must "espouse", *nolens volens*. A wise man will always find himself in some way symbolically older, more mature or more experienced than those around him.

Dilemma and loneliness

The master comes home "later than usual" and the faithful servant announces the bad news: something eminently suspicious is happening with the young woman. The latter, put on notice, is defiant. Why listen to the servants? Why don't you trust me? In other words: why choose me to share your life with if you are suspicious of me? She insists on the face to face, on the intimacy of their relationship, demanding to bring out the servant as a condition of access to the secret: the man must clarify his priorities, his choices, which are ambiguous for now. Once she gives the key, she withdraws, in order to leave her husband facing himself, his own conscience. Of course, she is embarrassed, but we will not know why: it is enough to know that the husband's requirement poses a problem to her, whatever the reason: fear, disappointment, shame, vexation, etc. These different theatrical outings of characters accentuate the dramatic dimension of the moment.

We can imagine the tragedy that this man is going through. Is it better to know or not to know? What can he learn by opening the chest? There are many scenarios that must jostle in the mind of this worried man. Such a moral or existential dilemma constitutes a real challenge of existence. His "wisdom", if ever he was wise, is put to a tough test. A great loneliness invades him. Such a drama may represent the preamble to what Sufis call "death before death" or "little death."

Curiosity and knowledge

He remains meditating for so long! Compulsively, he is playing with the symbolic power that represents the little key. The power to know, which we perhaps should dispense with. Then when the night approaches, conducive to decisions, the man determines his choice: that of not knowing. He decides to bury the object of the drama as far and as deeply as possible, in the dark night, by that very fact, this event in the depths of his soul.

The theme of curiosity is important in the tradition, as we see it in tales and myths. Very often, this ambiguous quality, both defect and quality, is linked to jealousy.

Yet curiosity is what leads us to know, to discover, so it is a source of truth. To solve the problem, Thomas Aquinas tried to contrast curiosity with studiosity, the second involving work, a process— not the desire for vain knowledge, which often consists in discovering the secrets of others. Curiosity is a defect if we do not add critical examination and methodical analysis. Knowledge does not have a value in itself: one can accumulate encyclopedic knowledge without any real value, as is sometimes encountered in the academic world or in the self-taught. Knowledge can be vain or unhealthy, a form of intellectual pride, of quest for power or primitive accumulation.

Ignorance and forgetting

One can imagine the debate taking place in the mind of our "thoughtful" man. He decides not only that he should not seek to know, but in addition, that he must get rid forever of an object that could generate such "covetousness" in him. Obviously, the modern reader will jump at the possibility of the thinly veiled murder that is presented to us. But we can also understand the symbolic dimension of the case, by a critique of the desire to know, as voyeurism that encourages us to observe the pettiness of mind and the mediocrity in others and to enjoy it, thus nourishing the lowness of soul within ourselves.

Nothing beats the peace of the soul as Nietzsche argues, the faculty of forgetting is an eminently philosophical virtue, a necessary condition for happiness. Thus curiosity is a defect one needs to get rid of, especially when it is very close to our hearts as in this case. It is a real work on oneself that our man must and will have to accomplish for the rest of his life: accepting the ignorance of a fact that touches him so closely. Seeing vice, seeking to see vice is already a way to soak it up. Ignorance or naivety can thus protect us from ourselves.

In conclusion, let us remember the three monkeys, of whom everyone knows the famous statuettes, who block their eyes, ears and mouths. Do they represent a critique of those who refuse to accept the truth or an encouragement to a wisdom which consists in being impervious to the surrounding evil?

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Is the husband responsible for the problem that happened to him?
- Is the husband a wise man?
- Which dilemma did the wife create for her husband?
- Why does the wife send the servant away?
- Why does the woman leave the room?
- Does the husband trust his wife?
- Does the woman trust her husband?
- What does this young woman symbolize?
- What does the final choice of the husband reveal?
- Did the husband learn anything through this incident?

Reflection

- ★ Why is it hard to make the right decision?
- ★ Is it desirable to know how to forget?
- ★ What constitutes wisdom?
- ★ Does trust have a cost?
- ★ Why do we fear being duped?
- ★ Are we always alone when the time comes to choose?
- ★ When facing a dilemma, do we always have to choose?
- ★ Is curiosity a quality or a defect?
- ★ What constitutes vain knowledge?
- ★ Why is uncertainty painful for us?

Chapter 16 The man who walked on the water

What is the purpose of knowledge?

A DERVISH, WELL LEARNED, TRAINED IN A DEMANDING AND AUSTERE SCHOOL, WAS WALKING ALONG THE RIVER, MEDITATING ON THE REALITY OF THINGS. THAT DAY, HE WAS ABSORBED BY GREAT THEOLOGICAL AND MORAL PROBLEMS, WHICH CONSTITUTED THE ESSENCE OF THE SUFI EDUCATION IN HIS SCHOOL. IT WAS THE ISSUE OF FINALLY DISCOVERING THE ULTIMATE TRUTH OF ALL THINGS. AS HE WALKED, COMPLETELY ABSORBED IN DEEP REFLECTIONS, A SHOUT INTERRUPTED HIS TRAIN OF THOUGHTS. HE RECOGNIZED A TRADITIONAL DERVISH INCANTATION, COMING FROM AN ISLAND IN THE MIDDLE OF THE RIVER. HE ALSO REALIZED THAT THIS MAN WAS COMMITTING A GRAVE ERROR. HE WAS SHOCKED.

– THESE WORDS ARE WORTHLESS, HE SAID ALOUD. HOW CAN THIS MAN THUS MASSACRE THE SACRED SYLLABLES! IT IS NOT "YA HU" THAT MUST BE CHANTED, BUT "HU YA HU!". HE CONSIDERED IT HIS MOST URGENT, – OR EVEN SACRED, DUTY– TO CORRECT THIS UNFORTUNATE WHO WAS SO LOST. NO DOUBT HE DID NOT HAVE THE CHANCE TO BE PROPERLY EDUCATED. NEVER COULD THIS POOR MAN ENTER IN RESONANCE WITH THE TRUTH! NOTICING A MOORED BOAT, HE BORROWED IT AND ROWED TOWARDS THE ISLAND. THERE HE FOUND A MAN DRESSED IN A DERVISH ROBE, SITTING ON THE FLOOR OF A MISERABLE HUT MADE OF REEDS. WHILE CHANTING THE INITIATORY FORMULAS, HE OSCILLATED TO THE RHYTHM OF HIS INCANTATION.

– MY GOOD FRIEND, THE LEARNED DERVISH SAID, THIS IS NOT THE RIGHT WAY TO PRONOUNCE! DON'T BE ANGRY WITH ME, I FEEL COMPELLED TO TELL YOU, BECAUSE KNOWLEDGE GIVES US OBLIGATIONS. MOREOVER, IT IS MERITORIOUS TO GIVE BENEFICIAL ADVICE TO YOUR NEIGHBOR, JUST AS IT IS TO RECEIVE SUCH ADVICE.

HE THEN EXPLAINED WHAT HAD TO BE DONE IN ORDER TO PRONOUNCE WELL. THE MAN HUMBLY THANKED THE MONK FOR HIS GENEROUS SUPPORT. THEN THE LEARNED DERVISH WENT BACK TO HIS BOAT, PLEASED TO HAVE DONE A GOOD DEED.

HE REMEMBERED THE WORDS OF HIS MASTER WHO CLAIMED THAT "THE MAN WHO MANAGES TO CORRECTLY REPEAT THE SACRED WORDS HAS THE POWER EVEN TO WALK ON WATER." HE HAD HIMSELF NEVER BEEN ABLE TO DO IT OR HAD EVER SEEN ANYONE TO HOLD SUCH POWER, BUT HE DID NOT DESPAIR THAT ONE DAY IT WOULD HAPPEN.

NOT HEARING NOISE COMING FROM THE ISLAND ANYMORE, HE THOUGHT THE MAN WAS PONDERING AND THE LESSON HAD SUCCEEDED. THEN HE HEARD A WEAK "YA HU", SOMEWHAT TIMID: THE MAN HAD RESUMED CHANTING, HESITANT, BUT STILL IN HIS USUAL IGNORANT WAY. THE LEARNED DERVISH WAS SOMEWHAT IRRITATED TO HEAR THIS. BUT HE CALMED DOWN BY STARTING A MEDITATION ON THE TENACIOUS PERVERSITY OF MEN AND THEIR INSISTENCE TO REMAIN IN ERROR. WHILE ROWING QUIETLY, HE WAS LOST IN HIS DEEP THOUGHTS, WHEN HIS EYES UNCOVERED THE STRANGEST SPECTACLE IN THE WORLD: THE DERVISH OF THE HUT HAD LEFT THE ISLAND AND WAS MOVING TOWARD HIM, WALKING ON THE SURFACE OF THE WATER. AMAZED, HE STOPPED ROWING INSTANTLY. THE MAN REACHED HIM AND ACCOSTED HIM WITH THE FOLLOWING REQUEST:

– BROTHER, FORGIVE ME FOR BOTHERING YOU, BUT I HAVE COME TO SEEK YOUR HELP. CAN YOU TELL ME AGAIN THE CONVENTIONAL METHOD THAT YOU TAUGHT ME? BECAUSE I REALLY STRUGGLE TO REMEMBER IT.

Dogmatism

There is a powerful tendency in human beings, called dogmatism. It can be defined as the tendency to state certain principles and establish them as incontestable truths, without any consideration for obviousness, critical sense or opinion of others. In general, we like to believe that what we say is true often we prefer our own opinions to what comes from elsewhere. Moreover, when a person has invested a lot and for a long time in the development of certain ideas, it is even more the case: a kind of "ideological" shell has slowly crystallized, which prevents any foreign "body" from penetrating, or even rejects everything that comes against this construction.

Although the concept of dogma has a negative connotation, for its rigidity and lack of openness, it has its *raison d'être*. Historically, it is about an opinion or a belief considered incontestable, just, true, useful, by a political or religious power, which imposes it as an established truth. Even if we discuss the legitimacy of this or that doctrine and the means used to impose it, for all intents and purposes we must accept the idea that any social, political, community or even family grouping requires certain dogmas. These are certain transcendent values or principles that form the basis of the unity of this group, thus allowing it to function. Of course, such a dynamic identity necessarily breeds a phenomenon of xenophobia, because the one who does not adhere immediately becomes an "other": a stranger, or an enemy.

Knowledge and authority

"I know I don't know anything." This is Socrates' famous phrase, which serves as a spearhead against the "scholars." These are the sophists, the ones who "know everything". So we were paying dearly to receive their education. We can therefore understand why Socrates was condemned to death, he who allowed himself to question these scholars, plunging them into embarrassment. He prevented them from deploying their encyclopedic knowledge, their wisdom, or, should we say, their doctrine.

Thus, as for the "learned" dervish of this history, when someone has studied at length, he holds authority. Certainly, one can say that he deserves this authority, for having worked so laboriously. But he can also be suspected of pretension: that of being always right. We will therefore oppose, as we see in this story, the pride of the one who "knows" or claims to know, to the humility of the one who really knows because he knows his own ignorance.

It is in this opposition that Socratic criticism is articulated: for the "scholar" it is a question of holding reason rather than reasoning, of knowing rather than thinking, of asserting with certainty rather than of seeking. And when he allows himself to reason, it is by taking as his postulate what he "knows", what he "is". He cannot radically question the legitimacy of his knowledge and the presuppositions that founded it, he cannot reflect his being: he is not the object of reflection and problematization for himself. He is a victim of the "serious mind", according to Sartre: he takes his subjective choices for unquestionable objectivity. He knows, he has the last word: when he has spoken, there is nothing more to say.

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Theory and practice

One of the essential issues in the history of thinking is the opposition between theory and practice, between idealism and pragmatism, between a priori and a posteriori idea. Do we have innate ideas or do we think from our observations of the world? This is one of the most important quarrels in the history of thinking: on the one hand rationalists or idealists such as Descartes, Spinoza or Hegel, on the other the empiricists, utilitarians or pragmatists, such as Locke, Hume or Popper. The formers are interested in theory, the latter are more concerned with practice.

In this story, the firm stance is that of criticizing theoretical idealism, described as dogmatic. This is an important claim of Sufi thinking. Even though this doctrine is based on a number of great religious, moral and epistemological principles, this wisdom tends to favor a practice: a way of acting and being, concerned with circumstances and specificities. In this sense, all ritual patterns are considered with a certain distance, even a certain skepticism, because of the illusion and rigidity they entail. Action, on the contrary, is inscribed in the reality of the world, it forbids any fixed posture. The learned dervish, "fine" theoretician, initiated into the arcana of form, "knows" what to do in theory, but he does not know what to do in practice. Fulfilment is in fact an almost impossible dream for him. The "ignorant" dervish, on the contrary, little- or not at all- embarrassed by the weight of knowledge, knows what to do. He goes straight to the point. Ironically, the "means"- the repetition of the "good" syllables- are a problem for him: he does not master them well. Under this difficulty, no doubt he actually attaches little importance to form, by wisdom or by incompetence. Intuitively, he prefers the spirit to the letter. Paradoxically, his unconsciousness is what guarantees his conscience, his ignorance is what allows his science, his theoretical impotence is what founded his practice.

Consciousness and unconsciousness

Each of the two dervishes knows one thing and ignores another. The first dervish puts forward what he knows, from which he derives certainty and pride, the second, humbler, is more concerned with what he does not know. If we accept the principle that what we do not know is infinitely greater than what we know, the second dervish is wiser than the first, therefore more aware of the reality of himself and that of the world. Certainly, he must know that he is walking on water, but it seems natural to him: he does not perceive here an extraordinary event which he could be ecstatic about, nor an opportunity to draw any pride from it. Because he is aware of his own inadequacy, he is much more interested in what the "master" wants to teach him. One wants to learn, the other claims to teach. The "ignorant" dervish is more aware than the "learned" dervish of the infinite dimension of what remains for him to accomplish: to reach the ineffable through words and gestures. While the "scholar" finds himself immersed in finitude: both that of his "acquired and certain" knowledge and that of the result that seems to fascinate him, walking on water. It is for this reason that he attaches such importance to this gesture, whereas it represents so little in comparison to the ultimate reality: the infinity of God.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why is the learned dervish shocked when hearing the incantations?
- What is the importance of "sacred words"?
- Is the learned dervish animated by a moral sense?
- What does the learned dervish research?
- Is the second dervish naive?
- Why does the second dervish have trouble pronouncing the "sacred words"?
- Why does the second dervish ask help from the learned dervish?
- Why cannot the learned dervish walk on water?
- Which of the two dervishes is more conscious?
- What fundamentally distinguishes the two dervishes?

Reflection

- ★ Why do we try to know things?
- ★ Is knowledge a power or a trap?
- ★ Is naiveté a quality?
- ★ Why does ignorance pose a problem?
- ★ Why do we persevere to remain in error?
- ★ Why are we fascinated by the extraordinary?
- ★ Why does disagreement trouble us?
- ★ Can consciousness be a problem?
- ★ Is it possible to know the truth?

★ Is wisdom proportional to knowledge?

Chapter 17 The lamp shop

Does absurdity make sense?

ON A MOONLESS NIGHT, IN A COLD, DESERTED STREET, TWO MEN MEET. ONE ADDRESSES THE OTHER.

– TELL ME, DO YOU KNOW THE AREA? I AM LOOKING FOR A STORE THAT IS CALLED THE LAMP BOUTIQUE. IT IS SUPPOSED TO BE NEARBY, BUT I CANNOT FIND IT.

– I KNOW THE AREA, ANSWERS HIS INTERLOCUTOR, I LIVE THREE BLOCKS AWAY FROM HERE. SO I CAN GUIDE YOU TO THIS PLACE.

– I WOULD RATHER TRY TO FIND THIS PLACE ALONE. THEY EXPLAINED TO ME HOW TO GET THERE, I EVEN NOTED DOWN ALL THE INDICATIONS – THEY ARE WRITTEN ON THIS PIECE OF PAPER.

– SO I DON'T SEE WHY YOU CAME TO ME, IF YOU WANTED TO MANAGE IT BY YOURSELF.

– IN FACT, IT WAS JUST TO TALK. THE NIGHT IS DARK.

– REALLY! YOU AREN'T LOOKING AT ALL FOR THIS SHOP, BUT SEEKING COMPANY.

– I THINK YOU'RE RIGHT, THAT'S PROBABLY IT.

– BUT IF YOU WANT TO FIND THIS SHOP, IT WOULD BE MORE CONVENIENT TO BE GUIDED BY SOMEONE WHO KNOWS THE AREA, SINCE YOU'RE NEARLY THERE. ESPECIALLY BECAUSE THE LAST PART IS A BIT COMPLICATED.

– I QUITE TRUST THE PEOPLE WHO TOLD ME THE WAY, THEY KNOW WHAT THEY ARE TALKING ABOUT. MOREOVER, THEIR EXPLANATIONS ALLOWED ME TO GET HERE AND I'M ALMOST THERE, AS YOU SAY. THIS IS A PROOF, RIGHT? AND I'M NOT SO SURE I CAN RELY ON OTHER PEOPLE.

– NEVERTHELESS, IT IS WEIRD THAT YOU TRUST THE PEOPLE WHO INFORMED YOU, WHEN NO ONE HAS GIVEN YOU THE MEANS OF DISTINGUISHING TRUSTWORTHY PEOPLE FROM THOSE YOU CANNOT TRUST.

– MAYBE YOU ARE RIGHT.

– IN THE END, WHAT IS YOUR GOAL?

– JUST AS I SAID: FIND THIS LAMP BOUTIQUE.

– CAN I ASK YOU WHY YOU ARE SO EAGER TO FIND THIS STORE?

– BECAUSE I KNOW FROM A RELIABLE SOURCE THAT IN THIS PLACE YOU CAN FIND DEVICES THAT ALLOW YOU TO READ IN THE DARK.

– INDEED. BUT THERE IS SOMETHING YOU'VE PROBABLY FORGOTTEN.

– REALLY?! WHAT? I DON'T SEE AT ALL. WHAT HAVE I FORGOTTEN?

– TO READ WITH A LAMP, YOU MUST ALREADY KNOW HOW TO READ, RIGHT?

– YOU CERTAINLY CANNOT PROVE THIS!

– INDEED, IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT ON A NIGHT AS DARK AS THIS ONE. AND THEN YOU ARE MISSING IMPORTANT INFORMATION.

– WHAT INFORMATION?

– THE LAMP BOUTIQUE IS WHERE IT ALWAYS HAS BEEN, BUT ALL THE LAMPS WERE TRANSPORTED ELSEWHERE, TO ANOTHER SHOP.

– LISTEN, I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT A LAMP IS, EVIDENTLY! BUT OBVIOUSLY IT IS IN A LAMP BOUTIQUE THAT YOU FIND LAMPS. THAT'S WHY THEY ARE CALLED LIKE THIS, RIGHT?

– INDEED! EXCEPT THAT LAMP BOUTIQUE HAS TWO POSSIBLE MEANINGS. IT MAY MEAN

"THE PLACE THAT SELLS LAMPS", BUT ALSO "THE PLACE WHERE THEY SOLD LAMPS IN THE PAST, BUT NOT ANYMORE."

– THIS AS WELL, I'M SURE YOU CANNOT PROVE IT!

– DO YOU REALIZE THAT IF SOMEONE LISTENED TO YOU, HE MIGHT TAKE YOU FOR A FOOL?

– I THINK YOU WOULD BE CALLED A FOOL! BUT I WANT TO BELIEVE THAT YOU'RE NOT ONE. FOR I SUSPECT THAT IN FACT YOU HAVE A WELL-ESTABLISHED PLAN. YOU PROBABLY WANT TO SEND ME TO A LAMP SHOP HELD BY A FRIEND OF YOURS, RIGHT? OR, FOR WHATEVER REASON, YOU DON'T WANT ME TO BUY A LAMP.

– IT'S WORSE THAN YOU THINK! RATHER THAN LETTING YOU SEEK YOUR LAMP BOUTIQUE, ALLOWING YOU TO BELIEVE THAT THIS WILL SOLVE YOUR PROBLEM, I WANT TO KNOW IF YOU CAN READ OR NOT. I ALSO ASK MYSELF IF YOU HAVE EVER SEEN SUCH A SHOP, IF YOU KNOW WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE. SIMILARLY, I WOULD ALSO LIKE YOU TO WONDER IF THERE ARE ANY OTHER PLACES WHERE TO FIND SUCH A LAMP, OR OTHER MEANS TO READ IN THE DARK.

THE TWO MEN LOOKED AT EACH OTHER SADLY. THEN EACH WENT HIS WAY.

Loneliness

Darkness and cold often reign in human relationships, in their exchanges and discussions. The atmosphere is squalid in this scene where the story takes place, the unkind initial ambiance is a prelude to the exchange that will follow. Precisely, a man approaches another because he is looking for a place where one is supposed to sell lamps: it is a matter of fighting against the darkness. Besides, he cannot find what he's looking for. Does he not look like many, if not all of us? We wander in searching, without necessarily knowing the object or the cause of our research. But sometimes we discover that we mostly run away from loneliness. So we're talking to whoever is there, no matter who he is, just not to be alone in the dark. The important thing is to establish a relationship. But this one is never completely free. More or less rapidly, specific issues emerge, usually related to identity, power, self-image, competition, etc.

In this case, it is a question of knowledge and a capacity for autonomy, that is to say a power and therefore an identity. Accepting the help from others, is to become dependent, to lose face. In consequence, the one we call the stranger, after requesting assistance, refuses the help offered to him, even if he had nothing to lose, it would have allowed him to engage further in the new relationship. One can imagine that he could have accepted this proposal just to socialize. But obviously he could not accept to grant such a power over himself to others, his identity would have felt threatened. This is how we generate and perpetuate loneliness: coldness and darkness inhabit our hearts.

Trust and mistrust

The resident – the regular of the place – hastens to point out his contradiction to the stranger, since the latter had approached him asking if he knew the neighborhood and the Lamp Shop, thus by asking for information and help. We see that the stranger is willing to ask for assistance, but without it being made explicit. He prefers to ignore the reality of his gesture; above all he refuses to admit his own weakness. Without much conviction he withdraws, explaining that he looked for company, almost a concession to his interlocutor.

Through the questions and remarks of his interlocutor, we now discover whether or not he trusts in a totally arbitrary way, without really knowing what the criteria are. This problem is all the more interesting since the question of trust arises in exactly the same way towards others as towards oneself. Schopenhauer aptly described this contradictory tendency to others: "When winter comes, a group of hedgehogs is faced with a corneal choice between suffering a deadly cold or getting close to each other at the risk of mutually injuring themselves." We look for others and we flee them at the same time.

Absurdity

The next step is to determine the purpose of the quest: apparently, finding this famous "Lamp Shop". But when we question this finality, often, we discover another: to be able to read in the dark. However, for this purpose to make sense, it is necessary to know how to read. But this inference does not fill with enthusiasm the stranger, who refuses it with a purely rhetorical and gratuitous argument: "You cannot prove it." Reality bothers him again. All means are good to refute what is nevertheless common sense. The resident's comment is interesting, agreeing that "on such a dark night" the proof would be difficult to give. He refers as much to the narrative context as to the darkness that reigns in the mind of his interlocutor.

Further on, the name itself is problematized. A lamp shop does not necessarily have lamps, contrary to appearances. Indeed, even if the name is invariant, the reality of things is floating. But this hardly affects our hero who, wanting to be very logical, affirms that what is named in a certain way definitely must correspond to the reality of its name. Again, he uses the rhetorical argument of "you cannot prove it". We know he is right, because the night is dark...

The resident is then surprised, in a sincere or pedagogical way. Is it out of irritation or despair, or by artifice of shock, that he invites his interlocutor to examine the inanity of his words? To do this, he proposes to him to think of himself from an external perspective: the position of an observer, therefore a priori objective and neutral. He invites him to become aware of his own absurdity, to which the stranger responds with the infantile and classic argument of "a tit-for-tat". "I think you are the one who would be called a fool!" And he does not want to let the matter rest there, because feeling threatened by the arguments of reason proposed to him, he goes on the offensive, the best defense being the attack. He therefore accuses the "resident" of having dark plans against him. He wants to take advantage of his money, or, for some obscure and threatening reason the nature of which is unknown, he wants to prevent him from buying a lamp.

By way of conclusion, through his various questions, "the resident" reveals to him the secret, the reality of the moment, even worse than what the stranger imagined: he made the "stranger" think, think the unthinkable, question the obvious, assess the ins and outs of the certainties that animate him, made him aware of the significance of his unconsciousness. Should the latter classify this in the category of bad intentions? This is often what happens when we invite others to question ourselves. Anger is a common reaction when we question the legitimacy of our ideas, wills and actions.

Very often, when we ask a practical question, when we want to solve a "simple" problem, as the hero of our history, we do not realize that we could not do without dusting our whole being off again: it is a matter of examining our own presuppositions, of facing our own contradictions.

We want an immediate response, instead of being interested in our own existence. No wonder this impossible dialogue ends so sadly and everyone goes their own way, as if nothing had happened. Although we know that after this kind of dead-end exchange, despite our ill-will, we still became aware that nothing will be the same as before.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- What does the murky atmosphere of this story symbolize?
- Is the stranger confident or suspicious?
- Why does the stranger contradict himself?
- What does the "Lamp Shop" represent?
- Does the stranger really seek the lamp store?
- What signifies the idea of "reading in the dark"?
- What does the stranger ultimately look for?
- Why do the two men argue?
- What does the final sentence of this story mean?
- Does this story make sense?

Reflection

- ★ What are we seeking through dialogue?
- ★ Should we understand each other in order to dialogue?
- ★ Why in general do we argue?
- ★ What problem poses rationality?
- ★ Do we always know what we want?
- ★ What is the cause of loneliness?
- ★ Why do we feel the need to insult others?
- ★ Why do we often dodge other people's questions?
- ★ Are we all misunderstood?
- ★ Can absurdity make sense?

Chapter 18 The king who wanted to be generous

Do we always expect something?

A POWERFUL KING, WHO ONE DAY WAS BORED, SUMMONED A DERVISH AND ASKED HIM TO TELL A STORY.

– MAJESTY, REPLIED THE DERVISH, I WOULD FANCY TELLING YOU THE STORY OF THE MOST GENEROUS KING OF ALL TIMES. IF YOU WERE LIKE HIM, YOU WOULD CERTAINLY BE THE GREATEST OF ALL LIVING KINGS.

ONE FELT A SHARP TENSION RISING AMONG THOSE WHO LISTENED TO THIS EXCHANGE, BECAUSE NOBODY SPOKE TO THE KING IN SUCH A WAY. IT WAS CUSTOMARY TO LET HIM KNOW THAT HE WAS ALREADY THE GREATEST LIVING KING, BECAUSE OF COURSE HE WAS ENDOWED WITH THE BEST QUALITIES AT AN UNPRECEDENTED LEVEL.

– TELL ME THIS STORY, THE KING REPLIED, VISIBLY ANNOYED, BUT BEWARE, BECAUSE IF YOUR STORY IS NOT LIVING UP TO YOUR WORDS, YOU WILL GET BEHEADED FOR SLANDERING YOUR KING.

THE DERVISH, WHO REMAINED UNRUFFLED, TOLD THE LONG STORY OF A KING WHO SACRIFICED HIS KINGDOM AND EVEN HIS OWN PERSON SO THAT NO ONE WOULD EVER SUFFER BECAUSE OF HIM. AFTER HEARING THIS STORY THAT HAD CAPTIVATED HIM, THE KING FORGOT HIS THREATS AND DECLARED:

– HERE IS A GREAT STORY, DERVISH; WE SHALL BENEFIT FROM IT. YOU, OF COURSE, CANNOT ENJOY IT, BECAUSE YOU POSSESS NOTHING AND HAVE NOTHING TO GIVE. YOU HAVE GIVEN UP EVERYTHING AND DON'T EXPECT ANYTHING FROM THIS LIFE. BUT I AM A KING, RICH AND POWERFUL. YOU WILL SEE THAT I CAN BE THE MOST GENEROUS OF ALL, MORE THAN YOU COULD EVER IMAGINE. FOLLOW ME AND SEE WHAT I WILL DO.

THE KING WENT UP TO THE TOP OF A HILL OVERLOOKING THE TOWN. HE SUMMONED HIS BEST ARCHITECTS AND ORDERED THEM TO BUILD A HUGE BUILDING CONSISTING OF A LARGE CENTRAL ROOM SURROUNDED BY A WALL OF FORTY WINDOWS. THEN HE ORDERED A MAJOR PART OF HIS TREASURE TO BE MOVED INSIDE THAT BUILDING. ALL MEANS OF TRANSPORT WERE USED TO CARRY HEAPS OF GOLD COINS, WHICH TOOK A LONG TIME. ONCE EVERYTHING WAS READY, THE KING SENT WORD THROUGHOUT EVERY CORNER OF THE KINGDOM, THAT EVERY DAY HE WOULD APPEAR ON EVERY WINDOW TO DISTRIBUTE HIS WEALTH TO THE NEEDY OF THE COUNTRY. SOON, THE NEWS SPREAD EVERY DAY THAT THE NEEDY CROWDED AROUND THE MANY WINDOWS OF THE EDIFICE TO GET SOME PIECE OF GOLD FROM THE HANDS OF THE SOVEREIGN. THE KING ENJOYED EVERY MOMENT OF THE SITUATION. BUT AFTER SEVERAL DAYS, HE NOTICED THE ACTING OUT OF A MAN, APPARENTLY A DERVISH, WHO APPEARED EACH TIME, TOOK A GOLD COIN AND WENT AWAY WITHOUT EVER THANKING THE KING, UNLIKE OTHER BEGGARS. THE KING WAS SURPRISED TO SEE SUCH A MAN COMING AND RECEIVING THE GOLD. AT FIRST HE TOLD HIMSELF THE MAN HAD A GOOD REASON; HE THOUGHT IT WAS LIKELY TO DISTRIBUTE THIS WEALTH TO SOME POOR PEOPLE, AS A FORM OF CHARITY. BUT CURIOSITY AND SUSPICION SLOWLY ACCOMPLISHED THEIR WORK. AND AFTER FORTY DAYS, IRRITATED BY THIS CONTINUOUS MANEUVER, HIS PATIENCE TO THE END, THE KING OPENLY SHOWED HIS IRRITATION AND CALLED THE DERVISH:

– UNGRATEFUL MAN! DON'T YOU KNOW HOW TO SAY THANK YOU FOR WHAT I DO? CAN YOU NOT BOW DOWN LIKE THE OTHERS? YOU COME EVERY DAY TO RECEIVE A PIECE OF

GOLD, COULD YOU AT LEAST SMILE IN RETURN AND SHOW SOME GRATITUDE? HOW LONG WILL THIS LAST? AND LET ME KNOW: DO YOU BENEFIT FROM MY GENEROSITY IN ORDER TO GET RICH, OR FOR USURY? YOUR BEHAVIOR IS NOT WORTHY OF A DERVISH! YOU PROBABLY WEAR THIS PATCHED OUTFIT IN ORDER TO DECEIVE US!

AS SOON AS THESE WORDS WERE SPOKEN, THE DERVISH TOOK THE FORTY GOLD COINS OUT OF HIS BAG AND THREW THEM TO THE KING'S FEET.

– TAKE YOUR GOLD, GENEROUS KING! AND KNOW THAT GENEROSITY HAS MEANING ONLY UNDER THREE CONDITIONS. TO GIVE WITHOUT EXPERIENCING THE FEELING OF BEING GENEROUS. TO GIVE WITHOUT EXPECTING ANYTHING. TO GIVE WITHOUT EVER DOUBTING ABOUT ANYONE. WILL YOU EVER BE GENEROUS?

Glory

One might wonder why a powerful king, like the one in this story, would be looking for glory. What more could a man who apparently owns everything want? We learn that he is bored. And this happens when we are no longer passionate about anything. It is precisely because nothing is missing that something is missing. In this case, he lacks the glory, which apparently one never has enough.

Glory is not just recognition or mere celebrity. These two attributes apply exclusively to men, glory is also attributed to the gods. The glory of God is not simply what is engendered by human prayer, piety and reverence; it is this intrinsic quality of the god that places him above mortals. One understands consequently the outrage represented by the "neutral" fact of comparing the present king to another who would be described as "incomparable", even if it were a legend. The mere mention of such a possibility is a crime of lese-majesty: the great king would indeed be wronged by his greatness.

Glory transcends everything, both the boundaries of space and those of time. It is a quest for immensity and eternity, for surpassing, for incomparable and unconditional. It transcends every detail, it is an aura, a halo that crowns the face of the wonderful character, who is no longer a mere mortal. Whoever is adorned with it becomes sacred.

This is what our king suffers from, burning for this impossible quality, the satisfaction of this rare desire he cannot command at will. It is a thirst for infinity that he would want to satisfy, an absolute that he would like to subjugate by attaching it to his own person. As if glory could be conquered!

Good conscience

According to Rousseau, the human being is animated by a moral feeling that drives him to do good. This implies that if we do not do it, we feel a certain unease. We aspire to be recognized by others as "moral" or "good": this is our reputation. Moral codes are often collective. Hence the origin of the principle of "good conscience": the personal satisfaction of agreeing to social codes.

For Kant, if "goodwill" is essential, morality is above all a deliberate effort, determined by reason, in correspondence with established values. The morals of the consequentialist type rather postulate that it is the examination of the consequences of an action that must constitute

the basis of its evaluation. Several factors combine: act well, because it seems good or useful to us, feel "good" and be recognized as such. Now the king of our history certainly seeks to be recognized as good, as extremely good, even as supremely good. He decides to do it through one of the classics of "good": by practicing charity. Through this, he seeks both glory and "good conscience." The latter can be defined here as the feeling of duty accomplished, which provides a certain well-being. It is opposed to bad conscience, which tells us what is not done, what cannot be done or remains to be done, or what has been done and should not have been done. Bad conscience indicates lack, fault, guilt, it provides a certain unease, but it is the essential driving force behind morality: what pushes us to act.

The problem which consequently arises is that of intention. Why do we act? The story that the dervish tells the king is intended to make him aware of this problem, by pushing him into action so that he knows himself better, so that he perceives the factuality of his being. It is about bringing to the light the immorality and the vanity that hide behind the superficial pretensions of morality. Through this example, the tale shows us that the dynamic of "good conscience" remains a very common pattern, which consists in pretending to buy at a giveaway price a complacent satisfaction and a comfortable reputation.

Calculation or generosity

The first dervish puts the king to the test by telling him a story, so that he becomes aware of himself, of his ambitious and vain side. The second dervish also puts him to the test not by words, but by deeds, in order to verify the authenticity of his generosity. Of course, the king failed by giving him his money and the dervish offers him some terse recommendations or reproaches. Actually, it is a kind of explanation of what determines the true gift. The first condition is not to expect anything. The second is not to seek in the gift the feeling of being generous, that is to say the satisfaction of good conscience. For if we wish above all to "take advantage" of our generosity, there are certain gestures or signs expected, such as the gratitude of others. Thus our king, by lavishing charity, acquires as expected an increased social recognition.

As anthropologist Marcel Mauss has identified, such an exchange naturally generates a form of superiority between the donor and the recipient. The gift actually generates a certain dependence, creating both social bond and social difference, where a certain form of hierarchy is naturally established. Besides, the gift always leads to a kind of counter-gift, in this case, a simple sign of allegiance; this is what is firmly expected, even if it is not specified. Thus the conflicting potential of the gift is manifest, because it is in a way ritualized by the social codes which it is a question of not transgressing. Thus, when the dervish disguised as a beggar continues to receive the gift without expressing any gratitude, he can only upset the king. Such a man shows an unacceptable insolence, he openly proclaims a rejection of the pact, which can only frustrate the king of his expectations, thus indirectly referring him to the sordid nature of his dark calculations barely disguised under a magnanimous exterior.

Suspicion

The dervish's third and final injunction is "to give without ever having doubt about anyone." For we see in the course of the narration how the king comes to suspect the false beggar by

attributing to him the most petty intentions. We can glimpse two aspects to this suspicion. The first is based on expectations. As we have seen, the king is "waiting" for something, a form of personal satisfaction, even though he is not really aware of it. But because he is waiting for something, he necessarily fears not getting it, he doubts, he is worried. Any expectation is necessarily coupled with both hope and anxiety. However, if time passes without tangible results, or if refusal or impossibility becomes manifest, it generates frustration and even resentment, depending on the prominence and importance of this expectation.

The other aspect of suspicion is based on a phenomenon of projection, even less conscious than that of expectation. The king is animated by dark calculations: glory, recognition, competition, power, etc. When he "manifests his goodness", it's just staging. How could he not think that everyone operates the same way? His being is structured in a determined way that we can call his vision of the world: he thinks and acts through this specific prism. For the king of history, everyone calculates and desires, all of them fear and fight: it is not possible to do otherwise. A man could not thus persevere in the good, for free, without ulterior motives or hidden finality. The "pure" gift, without any expectation, being impossible, this man is therefore suspected. Confidence is an impossibility for this worried sovereign.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why would a powerful king be bored?
- Does the king need a dervish only to tell him a story?
- Why does the king get angry with the narrator?
- Why does the king feel superior to the dervish?
- Why does the king become generous?
- Why does the king get angry with the begging dervish?
- Why should we not seek "the feeling of being generous"?
- Why is the king suspicious of others?
- What is the common feature of the two dervishes in this story?
- Is the king pleased with himself?

Reflection

- ★ Why do we need to be flattered?
- ★ Is it possible to expect nothing from life?
- ★ Why do we become wary of others?
- ★ Why do we get bored?
- ★ Can glory make us happy?
- ★ Why do we often compare ourselves with others?
- ★ Are human beings tempted by excess?
- ★ Do we always know what motivates us?
- ★ Will man be eternally dissatisfied?
- ★ Is it possible to want to do good only in order to do good?

Chapter 19 The beloved

Do we love someone or do we love love?

THERE WAS ONCE A YOUNG MAN VERY MUCH IN LOVE. ALL ADMIRED HIM FOR HIS CONSISTENT PASSION. FOR SEVERAL YEARS, HE COULD NOT REACH HIS BELOVED; NUMEROUS CIRCUMSTANCES OPPOSED HIS PLANS. NEVERTHELESS, HOPE NOURISHED HIS HEART. BUT ONE DAY, HE FINALLY GOT THE MESSAGE HE EXPECTED FROM HIS BELOVED.

– COME JOIN ME TONIGHT, WE CAN FINALLY SEE EACH OTHER. AND I HAVE PREPARED A GREAT FEAST FOR YOU.

SHE MADE AN APPOINTMENT IN A GIVEN LOCATION AND ADDED:

– WAIT FOR ME UNTIL MIDNIGHT AND I WILL COME WITHOUT YOU HAVING ANY NEED TO CALL ME.

THE LOVER WAS OVERJOYED ON RECEIVING THIS MISSIVE. HE LET ALL HIS RELATIVES, FAMILY AND FRIENDS KNOW ABOUT THE NEWS. AS HE WANTED TO SHARE HIS HAPPINESS WITH EVERYONE, HE GAVE ALMS TO ALL THE WRETCHED OF THE CITY, OFFERING THEM BREAD AND MEAT. FINALLY, WHEN THE LONG-AWAITED MOMENT ARRIVED, HE WENT TO THE VENUE INDICATED BY HIS BELOVED AND WAITED. HE WAITED A WHILE, SOMEWHAT FEVERISH, ALTHOUGH PATIENTLY. AS TIME PASSED, IN THE END, HE FELL ASLEEP. AT NIGHT, THE BELOVED ARRIVED, TRUE TO HER WORD. BUT SHE FOUND HER LOVER DEEPLY ASLEEP! SHE CUT OUT A PIECE OF HER ROBE, WRAPPED IN IT A FEW NUTS IN THE SQUARE FABRIC STUFFED EVERYTHING INTO THE POCKET OF THE GARMENT WORN BY THE YOUNG MAN. AT DAWN, THE LOVER AWOKE, LOOKED FOR HIS BELOVED, BUT DID NOT SEE HER. HE FELT THE SMALL PACKAGE IN HIS POCKET. HE PUT HIS HAND IN AND PULLED OUT THE PRESENT GIVEN TO HIM IN HIS SLEEP. SEEING THE NUTS AND THE FABRIC, HE EXCLAIMED:

– MY BELOVED IS MORE FAITHFUL AND CONSISTENT THAN ME! IF I AM IN PAIN, IT IS MY FAULT.

Constancy

The hero of this story is admirable for the constancy of his passion. The term constancy comes from the Latin verb *constare*, which means "to be firm" or "to hold out", but also *constare*: "to stay together". It would be a virtue; thus the soul, the spirit, the person or the will must accompany without failing. But such a concept implies that there is also an opposing, powerful and threatening force, otherwise one would not understand why it is a matter to resist, how this resistance would constitute a virtue.

In this case, it is about constancy, that of love. Our hero is constant in his love, despite the circumstances that stand in his way. Here, love is therefore sufficient to itself, nothing can stop it, no matter the frustrations this love encounters. The heart of our lover feeds on hope. He can wait for eternity, one might believe, showing the autonomy and fortitude of such a hero.

Power and impotence

If the hero of this story can be seen as a strong personality, especially for the constancy that animates him, he can also be accused of impotence. Indeed, he cannot follow through with

his love story. Impotence, both psychological and sexual, one might say. He does not have the strengths or resources to carry out his business. Circumstances are always the main alibi for those who try to justify their impotence. The lover passively waits for a gesture from his beloved. Hope can also be called passivity.

Naturally, when the big moment of the meeting comes, he falls asleep! Hope, in Spinoza's philosophical lexicon, is a negative and sad passion, for it is an expectation characterized by uncertainty and inaction. It also comprises an overestimation of oneself in relation to the true balance of power of things: it is an imaginary evaluation of the possible which implies impotence because reality is not considered adequately. We expect more from the real than it seems to give, we bet and invest ourselves in the simple possibility. Hope has fear as its shadow, for we doubt the result. Hope is only the shadow or the antechamber of despair. So we can see in it a cessation of being, a lack of power.

Certainly, falling asleep can be taken as a moment of peace and bliss, it can also be interpreted as a moment of abulia. The lover did not know how to grasp the opportune moment. It is precisely this ability of being part of time that distinguishes the man of action from the contemplative.

The gift of the beloved is an interesting double symbol. Already, the staging is revealing: this being from beyond lets the lover know his passage during his sleep, as in a dream, she slips him a message. On the one hand, the square of fabric. It can indicate appearance and externality, the simple trace, since the lover would not have been able to put himself in the presence of his beloved. He will only have the envelope. The square of fabric can also indicate weaving, this slow and patient process where the threads intertwine to compose the garment: it is about not falling asleep while the weft and the warp are quietly interlaced. On the other hand, the nut, which is a classic symbol of Sufism: it represents faith, Islam. The bark, hard and brittle, is Sharia, the moral and religious code, the rigid and external aspect of the faith. The halve, the flesh, represents the *tarîqa*: the spiritual or mystical path which leads to self-transformation, the progressive stripping which allows the extinction of the self and access to the truth. Then the oil, invisible but present: the *haqiqah*. It indicates the truth, the reality, the absolute, the secret of the divine essence. The Sufi initiate must die to himself and free himself from the worldly attachments, those of the ego, in order to lose himself in God: the *haqiqah* is then revealed to him. This long progression is acquainted with many resistances, starting with the hardness and the solidity of the external envelope, so it is a question of not exhausting oneself and falling asleep on the way, in order to reach the true love, that of the divine.

The plurality of love

Greek antiquity had several terms to express different meanings of the general concept of "love". There are two in particular which seem interesting to summon here: *eros* and *agape*. *Eros* indicates love in its connotation of desire, possession, security, expectation, satisfaction. It is dependent on the loved object, which it cannot transcend. *Agapè*, on the contrary, rather refers to a connotation of gift, gratuity, generosity, sacrifice, disinterestedness. This modality in love values the loved object and the love given, rather than expecting something in return. The first love is human, it calculates and speculates, it knows impatience and frustration. The

second seems divine, it is simple, it has no other motivation than itself, it expects nothing since it already holds what animates and nourishes it.

Of course, it is not a question of classifying "loves" according to these two categories, but rather of articulating the love tension through this axis between desire for possession and gift of self. The present story portrays this opposition through two somewhat strange characters. A "lover" who waits without waiting for a "beloved" who hardly seems to exist. The beloved has passed by, she has left. Nevertheless, she left a message: all this would not have been in vain. Better to have loved and be disappointed than to have never loved. As with the nut and the Koran, it is a question of discovering the invisible oil, beyond the shell and the flesh. But one can easily stop at the hardness of the hull, the complacent satisfaction of the flesh. The first resists, the second seduces. However, you must know how to get over it and not fall asleep. If our hero managed not to give in to the harshness of absence, he would not be able to overcome the fullness of the presence. The apogee always leads to the perigee. Reality is ultimately boring. No doubt love is a slow, long and patient walk. It seems that with time, it can only survive through a kind of nonchalance. The true power of love would therefore be a constant presence, a peaceful abandonment, an infinite quest.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Who dominates the relationship in this story?
- Is the lover a weak person?
- Why do all admire the constancy of the lover?
- What role does hope play in this relationship?
- Why does the lover want to share his happiness with everyone?
- Why does the missive specify that there is no "need to call"?
- Why does the lover fall asleep fast?
- What is the meaning of the gift of the "beloved"?
- Why does the lover blame himself for the failure of the encounter?
- Is the beloved a real person?

Reflection

- ★ Do we choose who we love?
- ★ Is constancy always a quality?
- ★ Can circumstances be an alibi?
- ★ Does hope help us live or does it inhibit life?
- ★ Do we love love or do we love a person?
- ★ In love, must we accept everything from the other?
- ★ Do we always expect something when we love?
- ★ Can love deprive us of our resources?

- ★ Are there different kinds of love?
- ★ Must we love in order to know

Is it difficult to think?

ONE DAY, A KING CALLED HIS ADVISER, A SUFI SAGE, TO WHOM HE PRESENTED THIS PROBLEM:

– THE POWER OF TRUE THINKING IS CLEAR JUDGMENT, ESPECIALLY WHEN SOLVING A DILEMMA. IN FACT, HERE IS ONE DILEMMA THAT PUZZLES ME RIGHT NOW: SHOULD WE INCREASE THE KNOWLEDGE OF MY PEOPLE OR GIVE THEM MORE FOOD? WE KNOW THAT BOTH ACTIONS WILL BENEFIT THEM.

– SIR, WHY GIVE KNOWLEDGE TO THOSE WHO ARE UNABLE TO RECEIVE IT? RETORTED THE SAGE. WHY GIVE FOOD TO THOSE WHO DON'T UNDERSTAND THE REASON FOR IT? IT IS WRONG TO ASSUME THAT "BOTH ACTIONS WILL BENEFIT PEOPLE." IF PEOPLE CANNOT DIGEST THIS FOOD, OR IF THEY BELIEVE IT IS GIVEN TO THEM ONLY TO CORRUPT THEM, OR IF THEY FIGURE THAT IN THIS WAY THEY CAN ALWAYS GET MORE, YOU WILL HAVE FAILED. SAME FOR KNOWLEDGE. IF THEY ARE UNABLE TO EVEN REALIZE THEY ARE OFFERED KNOWLEDGE, OR IF THEY CANNOT UNDERSTAND THIS KNOWLEDGE, OR IF THEY CANNOT UNDERSTAND WHY IT IS GIVEN TO THEM, THEY WILL NOT BENEFIT FROM IT. TO UNDERSTAND IT BETTER, SUCH A PROBLEM MUST BE ADDRESSED IN STAGES. AND HERE IS A MEDITATION THAT COULD SERVE AS AN INITIATION TO A HIGHER STAGE: "WHAT IS MOST PRECIOUS IS WORTHLESS, WHAT IS WORTHLESS IS MOST PRECIOUS."

– YOU WILL HAVE TO EXPLAIN AND PROVE THIS TRUTH TO ME, BECAUSE I DON'T UNDERSTAND IT, SAID THE KING.

SO THE SUFI INVITED TO THE COURT A GREAT DERVISH AND ASKED HIM THE FOLLOWING QUESTION: "IF YOU COULD ASK AN INHABITANT OF THIS CITY TO ACCOMPLISH SOMETHING IMPORTANT, WHAT WOULD YOU ASK HIM TO DO?"

THIS DERVISH KNEW THE INNER WORKINGS OF THINGS. AND HE SAID:

– THERE IS A MAN, A MERCHANT AT THE BAZAAR, WHO COULD BECOME EXTREMELY RICH, CAUSE AT THE SAME TIME MAJOR BENEFICIAL CHANGES IN THE KINGDOM AND ALSO ADVANCE THE WAY, ALL THESE ONLY BY A SIMPLE GESTURE, BY GIVING A POUND OF CHERRIES TO ANOTHER MAN IN NEED.

THE KING WAS HAPPY TO HEAR THAT ANSWER, BECAUSE USUALLY THE SUFI MASTERS ARE NOT AS EXPLICIT NOR AS CONCRETE.

– SEND FOR HIM IMMEDIATELY, WE WILL ORDER HIM WHAT TO DO, HE EXCLAIMED.

WITH A DISAPPROVING GESTURE, THE TWO OTHERS HUSHED HIM.

– IT CANNOT WORK IN THIS FASHION, THE OPERATION CAN ONLY BE SUCCESSFUL IF THE MAN ACTS VOLUNTARILY, EXPLAINED THE MASTER.

ALL THREE THEN WENT TO THE GRAND BAZAAR, INCOGNITO, STRIPPED OF THEIR OFFICIAL CLOTHING, SO AS NOT TO UNDULY INFLUENCE THE MERCHANT'S DECISION. THEY APPROACHED THE STALL, EXAMINING FRUITS AS ORDINARY CUSTOMERS. THE DERVISH TOLD THE KING THAT HE MUST ACT AS THE TRIGGER: HE APPROACHED THE MERCHANT, GREETED HIM AND SAID:

– I KNOW A POOR MAN WHO LACKS EVERYTHING. COULD YOU OFFER HIM A POUND OF CHERRIES, AS AN ACT OF CHARITY?

THE MERCHANT BURST OUT LAUGHING.

– HEY, I'VE DEALT WITH MANY JOKERS IN MY LIFE, I SAW ALL SORTS OF TRICKS, BUT I HEARD THIS ONE FOR THE FIRST TIME. SOMEONE WANTS CHERRIES AND LOWERS HIMSELF BY ASKING ME TO GIVE THEM SUPPOSEDLY FOR SOMEONE ELSE, PRETENDING HE DOES THIS FOR CHARITY. THAT'S A GOOD ONE!

THE THREE MEN WENT AWAY.

– YOU SEE WHAT I WAS TALKING ABOUT? SAID THE SAGE. A VALUABLE MAN JUST MADE THE MOST VALUABLE SUGGESTION, BUT IT WAS WORTHLESS TO THE MAN IT WAS INTENDED FOR.

THE KING LOOKED AT HIM THOUGHTFULLY, THEN ASKED:

– WHAT ABOUT WHAT IS WORTHLESS, BUT PRECISELY PRECIOUS? THE WISE MEN BECKONED THE KING TO FOLLOW THEM TO THE RIVER. WHEN THEY REACHED THE BANK, THE TWO SUFI SEIZED THE KING AND THREW HIM INTO THE WATER. THEY KNEW VERY WELL THAT THE KING COULD NOT SWIM. THE LATTER WAS CHOKING AND STRUGGLING IN THE STREAM AND WAS ABOUT TO DROWN. MANY STRONG AND ABLE PASSERSBY HAD SEEN THE KING FLOUNDERING IN THE DEEP WATER, BUT NONE HAD MADE THE SLIGHTEST MOVE TO HELP HIM. A WRETCHED VAGABOND NICKNAMED "CRAZY UNCLE", A WELL KNOWN SIMPLETON ALWAYS WANDERING AROUND THE CITY STREETS, WAS PASSING BY, AS WELL. HE JUMPED INTO THE RIVER AND BROUGHT THE KING SAFE AND HEALTHY BACK ON THE BANK. THE DROWNED KING TOOK SOME TIME TO RECOVER FROM HIS EMOTIONS. BUT WHEN HE CALMED DOWN, THE TWO WISE MEN SAID TO HIM WITH ONE VOICE:

– SEE HOW ONE WHO IS WORTHLESS IS PRECIOUS.

THUS THE SOVEREIGN RETURNED TO HIS OLD TRADITIONAL METHOD, WHICH WAS TO GIVE WHAT HE COULD GIVE, EDUCATION, ASSISTANCE OR ELSE, IN ANY FORM WHATSOEVER, ON A CASE-BY-CASE BASIS, DEPENDING ON THE CIRCUMSTANCES, TO THOSE WHICH HE DEEMED MOST WORTHY OF RECEIVING THE AID.

The meaning of things

A king is interested in thinking, for itself and for its usefulness. He poses a problem: his initial hypothesis seems judicious. It is a question of knowing how to think clearly, by making a judgment, through a clear alternative. In this case, it is a matter of choosing between "to give people knowledge or to give them food." The primary motivation for this alternative is that "the people will benefit" in both cases. One could say that according to Sufi thinking, the king has already reached the second degree of "true" knowledge: knowledge of cause and effect. We also note that the king— a sign of his advancement— poses a major problem: the opposition between material and spiritual necessity.

His advisor, a Sufi master, will show him that an error nestles in his reasoning. First, in order to give knowledge to someone, that person must be able to receive it. We have here an important element of Sufi teaching, which is based on dialogue: knowledge in itself is worthless, it can even be harmful. The first question is to know who you are talking to, what that person is capable of and what she is going to do with that knowledge. Thus the very categorical way in which the king thinks here is not appropriate, it has to be contextualized or problematized. The same goes for the gift of food, although it has a material nature. It necessarily has a spiritual dimension. The gift adds an additional reality to the food, for it is an exchange. But every exchange has a meaning, which is to be understood, otherwise the gift is perverted or

senseless. Again, the question of dialogue arises in opposition to a pure "objectivity" of the act, of the thing given in itself. Therefore, one must not give to others without knowing what meaning it will have for them.

Logic and dialectic

Thus, the king has settled too hastily on the concept of "benefit for the people". His presupposition is not acceptable, his logic is too rigid and determined. Besides, the sage adds some objections to his initial criticism. One must take into account the "digestion capacity" people have, both in a literal and in a metaphorical sense, for food as for thinking. Secondly, if this gift provokes "bad thoughts", such as the suspicion of corruption, then this gift will rather feed vice in the people. Similarly, if this gift encourages greed, it would also indicate failure. And a fortiori, the same goes for knowledge. If people do not even understand what is given to them, if they do not even know that something is given to them, or if they ignore the purpose of knowledge, there will be no profit there.

At this point, the Sufi explains to the king that there is a gradation in knowledge to show him his ignorance, he proposes to him the "first degree" of this initiation. It is interesting to note that the king agrees to be only in the "first degree." This attitude shows that he is ready to be better educated. As an introduction to the next degree, a paradox on the theme of value is offered. The paradoxical side of the stated truth contrasts with the king's original scheme, rather logical in nature. We move from the more determined "this or that", to the more fluid "this is the opposite of itself". The first model is a logical pattern of exclusion, according to the principle of non-contradiction. The second is a paradoxical or dialectical model, of a larger and higher nature, since it invites us to go beyond appearances, superficial contradictions, however obvious they may be. In this scheme, opposites are not mutually exclusive, they echo each other. Thus any truth worthy of the name will tend to take a paradoxical form. Moreover, the paradox in question relates to a fundamental concept: value, that is to say to our hierarchies, to our aims, to what is essential. Now it is a question of discovering, according to Sufi teaching, that the most fundamental truths are necessarily of a paradoxical nature.

Being and unity

To explain in a concrete way the paradox presented, the Sufi calls another sage: a dervish, a Sufi ascetic. The fact that he knows "the inner workings of things" shows that he is a true initiate. For this is the ultimate wisdom: knowing how everything is one, not in an abstract and dogmatic way, but by knowing the links between things. This is a vision that we encounter in a good many philosophers, such as Spinoza, for whom the being is one: it is the substance of which everything is only a mode or a particular attribute of.

The sage presents a concrete example of this uniqueness of being and of inner workings, with the case of the merchant who could, by a simple gesture, greatly improve his lot, that of his country make the whole universe benefit. The king, always very "logical", exclaims that this man must immediately be told what to do, without understanding that personal freedom and approach are at the heart of this power.

One can still try to "trigger the event." There remains the possibility that each of us has to act on the world and on others, while leaving a part to indeterminacy. We can call it "letting

go", which does not mean giving up, but acting without wanting to control. The Sufi offers the merchant the possibility of this powerful action, which only requires manifesting a minimum capacity for solicitude, compassion or generosity. But nothing helps! His "merchant mind" can only see in others an attempt at manipulation or fraud.

The merchant cannot take the king seriously: wanting to help someone can only be a joke. How could this man understand that he is a reflection of the surrounding world since the latter is his picture? La Rochefoucauld wrote on this subject: "Our mistrust justifies the deception of others"—it is the cause and not the effect, which would correspond to the Sufi spirit. The singular and the universal are united. This is an important part of the "inner workings." If this man would change, then by this inner dynamic of the real, the world would change in its entirety, as strange as it may be. Thus, the most precious suggestion made by the most precious man remains of no value to the merchant. For he has no access to the unity of being: he is fearfully curled up on his own self.

Learning and experience

The king, disappointed, out of a desire for compensation, then wishes to know "what is worthless, but which is precious". The next lesson is violent. The two men unexpectedly throw the king into the water, while he cannot even swim. Any initiation goes through a test of being. Learning is an experience, not the transmission of information.

The king almost dies from this "lesson". Indeed, learning is somehow dying, if learning is worthy of the name. But the person who saves the king is simple-minded, despised by all. All the "good" people, who would have acted swiftly if they had known that it was the king, did not move. The king can then understand how "what is worthless is precious".

What does the king conclude from this adventure? That he could not categorically and absolutely solve the dilemma that he raised. It only remains for him to go back to the tradition, which consists in doing what we can in accordance with the circumstances, in accordance with the people.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- What is the point of asking for a clear alternative?
- What is the difference between "feeding" and "giving knowledge"?
- Why does the Sufi sage disagree with the initial question of the king?
- Why does the sage propose a paradox as an initiation?
- Why is the knowledge of "inner workings of things" important?
- Why should the king not reveal the "secret" to the merchant?
- Why does the merchant not seize the opportunity offered to him?
- Why are both wise men violent towards the king?
- Why is it a simpleton who saves the king?
- What has the king learned during his adventure?

Reflection

- ★ Should we understand the nature and intention of a donation in order to accept it?
- ★ Should an educator know his student well to educate him?
- ★ Is knowledge more precious than food?
- ★ Do all questions have presuppositions?
- ★ Are appearances always deceiving?
- ★ Is there really some "inner workings of things"?
- ★ Can education occur without violence?
- ★ Is the truth of a paradoxical nature?
- ★ What is the function of judgment?
- ★ Are we responsible for the order of the world?