



LEARNING TO PHILOSOPHIZE  
WITH **NASREDDIN  
HODJA**

Oscar Brenifier & Isabelle Millon

## Contents

Chapter	Introduction	
	THE NEGATIVE WAY .....	2
	THE CASE OF NASRUDDIN HODJA .....	6
Chapter 1	Being the first	
	Competition and singularity.....	10
Chapter 2	Where is the Truth?	
	Logic and conviction .....	14
Chapter 3	The Mirror	
	Reality and disappointment .....	19
Chapter 4	Shame	
	The look of others and the conception of oneself .....	24
Chapter 5	Truth or Death	
	Descriptive and performative speech .....	28
Chapter 6	The Good and the Bad	
	Morality and judgment .....	34
Chapter 7	Cunning	
	Ruse and intelligence .....	40
Chapter 8	The Turkey	
	Speech and thinking .....	47
Chapter 9	Swap	
	Rhetoric and confusion .....	52
Chapter 10	The Bedouin	
	Trust and blindness .....	59
Chapter 11	Dialogue of the Deaf	
	Listening and subjectivity .....	65
Chapter 12	The Turban	
	Appearance and identity.....	72
Chapter 13	The poet	
	Image and recognition.....	78

Chapter 14 It must be true	
Wishful thinking .....	81
Chapter 15 The donkey	
Truth and friendship .....	85
Chapter 16 Inch Allah	
Words and thinking .....	89
Chapter 17 The toothache	
Me and other ; identity.....	93
Chapter 18 The scholar	
Wisdom .....	96
Chapter 19 The preacher	
Teaching and learning .....	99
Chapter 20 The key	
Searching and finding.....	103
Chapter 21 The two wives	
Choosing and recognition .....	106
Chapter 22 The turban	
Responsibility .....	110
Chapter 23 The pumpkin	
Reasoning and certitude .....	114

---

## Nasruddin Hodja, a master of the negative way

Nasruddin is a myth more than anything else, even though in the city of Akshehir (Anatolia) in Turkey, some will pretend to show you the grave where he was apparently buried in 1284. If such a historical being did exist, he was only the starting point for a very large body of stories. The hero of those numerous funny and absurd tales encounters many situations and can alternately be a peasant, an imam, a boatman, a roaming preacher, a king's councillor, a teacher, or a judge. Like Ulysses, Nasruddin is no one and everyone, he represents a tradition – oral and written – more than a specific person, from which he draws his strength as a school of life more than as a petrified hero or a petrified opus. Even his name changes totally, since in his fame around the Mediterranean and beyond, even outside the Muslim world, he will come to bear different names such as: Jiha in Maghreb, Afandi in China, Nastradhin Chotzas in Greece and Hersch'le in Israel. The tales being told are efficient and pedagogical. Out of those stories, each listener will hear and understand what he can, with his own means. The apparent lightness of many of them reveal and hide a profound understanding of the reality of being, even if one can easily remain on a superficial external apprehension of them.

---

## THE NEGATIVE WAY

At the beginning of the Hippias Minor dialogue, a discussion takes place between Hippias and Socrates on the question of who is the best of the heroes of the Iliad, Odysseus or Achilles. It is all about lying, and Hippias claims that Achilles is a better man because he does not lie, unlike Odysseus, clever and cunning, who does not hesitate to preach the false. At one point in the discussion, Socrates shows that Achilles also makes certain statements that are not true, and Hippias then uses as his hero's defense the argument that he does not do it consciously: he just changed his mind, he is completely sincere. A debate that Socrates concludes by claiming that Odysseus is better than Achilles, because when he lies, he knows very well that he is lying, so he knows the truth better than Achilles.

We would like to use this example from a classical text of philosophy to introduce what we call the *via negativa* – negative path – of philosophical practice. We call it *via negativa* following the traditional concept particularly used in theology, which is commonly used to define, for example, the nature of God – unknowable – through the negation of what he is not. Thus, Socrates

defends the lie so as to defend the truth in an effective and real way, with the same irony that he claims his own ignorance as a teaching strategy. But if we look closely, this negative path is identical to the one we find in a more playful way in the clown, the actor, the writer, the cartoonist, the humorist, etc. All these very common modes of expression describe or stage certain patterns, behaviors, characters and situations as a way of denouncing them and obviously advocating for the opposite of what they represent. Thus, the pretentious, the selfish, the hypocritical, or any other defect will be presented in such a way—ridiculous, gross or exaggerated—so that this staging criticizes those who are affected by these defects, so as to encourage the quality that is opposite to them. Through this psychological exposure, we hear the Socratic injunction: "Know thyself".

An interesting and relevant aspect of this approach is the importance of the "unsaid". In these various modalities of expression, the author leaves enormous room for ambiguity and space for freedom of thought, since it does not saturate the meaning; it allows multiple representations and interpretations and captures our mind through this ambiguity. Thus the emergence of comedy in Europe at the time of the Renaissance is an example of the rise of a freedom to criticize, both the society and the power in place, therefore granting the permission to think. Yet, what allowed the court jester to play his role as a critic, including of the power of the king, without being punished, was precisely the playful dimension of speech, the power of the word, the power of ambiguity, and hence the importance of wordplay, the art of playing joyfully with meaning. Ruthless criticism was coming out of the mouth of the fool, but in a subtle and indirect way, so that if anyone was offended, he would reveal himself and become a laughing-stock. The baroque dimension where the world and the stage became a unique entity, each one of us becoming the distant spectator and the unique critic of himself, is a good illustration of this general principle.

---

## Philosophy and anti-philosophy

Nevertheless, negative theology is rather mystical, comedy is no more than a simple show, whereas philosophy is supposed to be of a rather "scientific" order: it is based on reason, logic, demonstration, trying to elaborate a coherent system where consequently ambiguity, insinuations, allusions, exaggeration and other "literary tricks" are not really welcome. Here we can remember Hegel's lectures on Plato, in which the simple fact that Plato tells a story like the Allegory of the Cave hence means for Hegel that his predecessor did not

produce a philosophical speech. Philosophy can only be rational and conceptual, and this Hegelian heritage will definitely change the face of Philosophy. Therefore, the image of the philosopher, like the nature of his productions, will tend to be cautious, serious or direct, rather than peremptory, indirect or funny.

But one could retort that this usual rational and moral discourse is simply the speech of comfort, complacency and convention, that of good conscience, that of philosophical correctness. This is what Nietzsche criticizes as the "small reason" as opposed to the "great reason" embodied in life, or when he denounces the illusory concept of human consciousness. Although this tendency of "negative philosophy" is not the hegemonic one – indeed, it is largely in the minority – it perseveres in the history of thinking as the eternal "other" of philosophy: its enemy brother, its shadow and its despiser.

This minoritarian tendency of philosophy, this anti-philosophy, which often tries to show and shock, more than it claims to say and explain, appears very early in the heart of philosophy itself, in a visible way, for example in Socrates' character and his devastating irony, this form of speech that says the opposite of what it asserts. What a historical joke we have here with this Socrates, whom we will recognize as the historical figure of the father of philosophy, its hero and martyr, whereas he is someone who preaches the false in order to know the true, and even worse, someone who shows that we are condemned to lying, wandering and plausible, since the truth cannot be known. He is said to be the father of rationality, by his work on concept. Yet he had to be killed, he who preached an anti-logic, for example in the dialogue of Parmenides where each proposal and its opposite are at the same time both defensible and indefensible.

The cynic, with his total lack of respect for each and everyone, provides in this context another interesting historical example: it is the rather rare case of a philosophical school whose name is even used as a moral condemnation. The same is true of nihilism, although Nietzsche will try to show that, contrary to appearances, nihilists are not those who appear this way in the eyes of the common man. Now what cynicism and nihilism both indicate, what they have in common with the Socratic method, is their power of denial, their great corrosive capacity. It is not so much the place to learn, but the place to unlearn. Principles should not be taught, but rather corrupted in order to be able to think. From then on, knowledge is perceived in opposition to thought: knowledge is conceived as a possession of fixed ideas that crystallizes, rigidifies and sterilizes the mental process. The main task of the master, if there is one, is to untie or break the knots that knowledge constitutes and imposes, to

undermine knowledge characterized as opinion – common opinion or educated opinion, as Socrates distinguishes them – so as to liberate the mind and allow the thinking to think. As in oriental practices such as Zen, what is needed is to short-circuit the usual or imposed paths of thinking, to grasp them through a shock effect, by means of conceptual paradoxes, critical analysis or certain "strange" behaviors, which should hopefully produce some enlightenment if the subject is not too obtuse. And when the mind will awaken to itself, it will know where to go, since the mind is naturally destined to think, except when hindered in its activity by some insidious and tenacious obstacle.

---

## Methods

"It is not doubt that drives you crazy, it is certainty", says Nietzsche. Even if Nietzsche's abrupt interpellation is definitely not the laborious Socratic questioning, both agree on the idea that one's mind should not be imprisoned in one's own thoughts. The thoughts that we entertain are caudal forks that prevent us from having other thoughts, especially when these thoughts are some sort of rigid general principles that determine what is acceptable and what is not. This resonates with Heidegger when he wrote: "What does give us to think the most about our times which give us much to think, is that we are not thinking yet." So we have to become a stranger for ourself in order to think, just as we have to alienate ourself in order to be.

The way Socrates operated this cognitive shock was through questioning, pushing the interlocutor to discover his own incoherence and ignorance, a process that allowed the person to give birth to a new concept: maieutics. For Heraclitus, the struggle of opposites engenders being, so the emergence of these opposites through aphorisms allows us to think and to be. For the cynics, man is so deeply entrenched in conventions that the only way to get him to think is to behave towards him in the most abrupt way: by insulting everyone, by eating on the ground or with their hands, by walking around naked or living in a barrel, by pretending that men are not men, etc. All these theatrical postures should affect the individual mind more than any speech would. In the Far East, the master would produce a strange paradox, or act in a strange way, and the student should meditate by himself on the meaning of these "incongruities", without any explanation being given a priori. And in some schools, the teacher would not hesitate to become violent in order to produce the desired "pedagogical" effect. A rather unthinking perspective that comes as a repugnance to those who think that philosophical practice is intended to put everyone at ease or to make them happy! And a posture very "unethical"

since the individual does not constitute more – as with Kant – his own end: he is the main instrument – and the obstacle – of the truth.

## THE CASE OF NASRUDDIN HODJA

There are various reasons why, among many examples of the negative path or prestigious anti-philosophical personalities, Nasruddin Hodja deserves special mention. The first reason is that he probably did not exist as a real person. Yet, strangely, one of the conditions of this type of teaching is precisely to develop a person's ability to cease existing: learning to die, at least symbolically. Although anthropological or cultural reality, Nasruddin is undoubtedly a myth more than anything else, even if in the city of Aksehir (Anatolia/ in Turkey, they will show you the grave where he purportedly was buried in 1284. If such a historical being existed, it was only in the origin– as a character or as an author – of a particular type of story, with innumerable variations. The hero of these many tales, amusing and absurd, encounters various situations. He can be alternately a peasant, an imam, a boatman, a roving preacher, a doctor, a king's adviser, a teacher, or a judge; he may not have a wife, may have one wife, two wives, from time to time he practices homosexuality; but even more conclusively on the mythical aspect of his existence is the fact that he is often depicted as the jester of Tamerlan, even though this Emir conquered Turkey at the end of the Fourteenth century. Like Odysseus, Nasruddin is both a nobody and everybody; he represents a tradition – oral and written – more than a specific character, and from this living source he draws his strength, for he is a school of life more than a frozen hero or a petrified opus, polymorphic nature, who is more conformed to his symbolic being. Even his name changes, since in his fame around the Mediterranean, he will come to bear the name of Djeha in the Maghreb countries, for example, Afandi in China, Nastradhin Chotzas in Greece, and Hersch'le in Israel. Moreover, his original Turkish name Nasruddin is very common in this part of the world: it means "glory of religion", Hodja referring to the vague title of "master".

The second reason why we chose him is the popular aspect of this character and what is said about him. His stories are simple and easily told, they seduce with their humor and make him a folk hero: amusing and lively, they are effective and pedagogical. Listening to these anecdotes, each auditor will hear and understand what they can, with their own means, a phenomenon that is interesting to observe when telling these various tales to different audiences. The reactions to the different contexts, to the allusions, to the degrees of subtlety, to the concrete and the absurd, will reveal more than many words would do



about who the listener is and how they think. Even the misunderstanding of a story is useful, since it sends everyone back to their own ignorance or blindness. This popular dimension is both what has prompted many anonymous authors to contribute to this myth, and what has ensured the extension and durability of this living work.

The third reason is the breadth of the field that the stories cover, precisely because they represent more a tradition than a particular author. Questions of ethics, logic, attitudes, existential problems, sociological problems, marital problems, political problems, metaphysical problems: there is a long list of the various issues or paradoxes presented to the person who enters this mass of critical thinking. The apparent lightness of certain stories reveals and hides a deep understanding of the reality of being, even if one can easily keep to an external and superficial capture of it. And if the "classical" philosopher claims that the conceptualization and analysis— such as what we are doing in the present text — are necessary to constitute philosophizing, it can be replied that this formalization of the content achieves a sterilizing function and gives the illusion of knowledge. But let us leave the debate on the nature and form of philosophy for another occasion. Nevertheless, as background information, we would like to mention the connection between Nasruddin and the Sufi tradition, which is part of the transmission of Nasruddin's stories, bearing in mind that Nasruddin was both the contemporary and neighbor of the great mystic poet Rumi.

The fourth reason is the terribly provocative personality of this living myth. At a time when political or philosophical correctness tries to promote ethics and "good conduct" in order to varnish the civilized brutality of our society, Nasruddin can be very useful, since he has all the main defects. He is in turn a liar, coward, thief, hypocrite; he is selfish, vulgar, rude, lazy, stingy, unreliable and ungodly; but more particularly he is quite an accomplished idiot and a fool. But he generously offers all these grotesque character traits to the reader, who will see himself as in a mirror, more visible in its deformity, in its exaggeration. It invites us to examine, accept and appreciate the absurdity in ourself, the nothingness of our personal being, as a way to free our minds and our existence from all these pretensions which are intended to give us a good conscience, but which compulsively incites us to personal and social lies more than everything. His way of being is a terrible and appropriate blow to the idolatry of the self, so characteristic of our western modern culture, a permanent and factitious search for identity and happiness. Through his atrocious "little lies", Nasruddin is helping us to expose the enormity of our "big lies" under a harsh light. And little by little, we would almost prefer to

take the place of his best and eternal friend: his donkey.

But let us shorten this overall analysis so as to tell some classic jokes by Nasruddin Hodja and make comments on them, from which we will be able to find meaning in these incongruous stories and see the interest of their philosophical content through their daily implications. Knowing however that the explicit philosophical dimension often was concealed by the simple narrative dimension. Nevertheless, the hypothesis that is essential here consists of thinking that an intuitive perception of the problem, a kind of transmission of a wisdom as popular as it is profound, passes on through the pleasure of this vis comica.

---

### The punch line

There is general paradox in the character of Nasruddin. He is terrible with us, he is devastating and pitiless with our egos, but we love him for it. In a period where reigns philosophical correctness, where we are supposed to be so nice and make everyone happy, when there is so much discourse on ethics probably because there is so little ethics, Nasruddin does not try to ‘value’ the individual and make him feel good. To philosophize is for him to show the nothingness of the particular being, so egocentric and blind. But then, why do we accept from him the kind of terrible criticisms we would not accept even from our best friend? One reason might be that he is actually pitiless for himself as well, which makes him our own brother, our better self. A brother that sacrifices himself to show us how foolish we are, who laughs at himself in order to laugh at us, a thwarted and funny kind of compassion. As a sort of inverted “Saint” like figure, who goes one step further than Socrates on the irony, as a good humored cynic, he takes on his own back all the stupidity, lies and mediocrity of the human species. But in spite of his “sacrifice” – he seems like such an idiot and a fool - Nasruddin is not a martyr! He laughs at us for such silly and sentimental ideas. Just one more trick we invent to feel good! Thanks to the wild spirit of our hero, let us be free, let us entertain silly and absurd perspectives. For it seems to us that the Nasruddinian perspective is not so much that men won’t be fools anymore, but that they will know a little bit more how they are great fools. That is called wisdom. The question here is not to cure, if only because there is no way to cure, or because there is nothing to cure... So there is nothing left to do but to watch the wonderful spectacle of the pathology, and to enjoy it as a Punch and Judy show, as grand theatre. Let us be entertained by this comedy of errors, let us laugh at the human drama. Much to do about nothing. That would be an excellent title.

So let's keep on being foolish and enjoy it. Maybe something will come out of all this joke and laughter. Maybe true therapies come in the least expected form...

## Chapter 1 Being the first

### Competition and singularity

In the early afternoon, while everyone is taking a nap behind the closed curtains, Nasruddin stands in the middle of the main square, sweating under a blazing sun. Passing by this deserted place, a neighbor gets very intrigued when he discovers him there. He asks him what he is doing there, risking sunstroke, when everything seems to be dead.

Nasruddin replies: "You are absolutely right. But, just in case something would happen, I want to be the first here."

### Anxiety

In this story, Nasruddin is portrayed as anxious, in a caricatured manner in this particular context, but nevertheless a completely realistic figure in its generality. It is a particular anxiety that animates people, for example in their work, siblings when comparing their respective successes, or parents when comparing the status of their children in the classroom. This anxiety is linked to others, to competition, to comparison. It comes under what can be called "longing", that feeling of envy for what belongs to others, for what concerns others, or what others might take from us, even though we do not or could not possess it. This is a very strange anxiety because if there were not anyone else, if it did not exist, it would have no reason to be. Thus this "other" takes the appearance of a threat, it is a permanent competitor and, moreover, it worries us because it generates needs that would not exist if this shadow did not permanently lurk around us. Because "others" feed all fantasies. One only may look at how magazines about the powerful, the rich and the famous meet with great success because they fascinate readers by stirring up their covetousness. They are admiring, envious and voyeuristic at the same time; they rejoice in the professional and sentimental setbacks of these stars thus portrayed. Closer to us, many quarrels between friends and especially family are related to these issues of mutual comparison, which are almost instinctive. This longing takes a particular, quite common form: to be the first. It is said in the business world that "being a leader" is a highly desirable and admirable status. "Wanting to be first" is such a common trend, motive or reaction in daily operations that we no longer even ask ourselves what motivates such a functioning, what is its nature. If not the first, it is in any case about being

the best, or being there before the others. Even though the school system officially decided to abandon the classification of pupils principle in France, there is always a gradation system, which goes from the most able to the least able, from the superior to the inferior, from the elite to the plebeian. The ranking of the "best universities" is a good example of this.

Such an attitude could be justified by our animal nature, since it is about surviving in a world of competition, the survival of the more able or stronger. And after all, why not? This gives rise to emulation, a motivation like any other. Nevertheless, as always in Nasruddin's stories, it is a question of staging excess: to show us how compulsive behavior can prove to be nonsense, using a demonstration of the absurd. The purpose of such awareness is to send us back to the instinctive, unconscious and determined modality of these processes in order to implicitly oppose cultural, intellectual or moral dimensions, which could be revealed from it. Such a reflection is supposed to make us, by mirror image, consider the dimension of free will and self-determination in our actions, which would allow us to act deliberately and not compulsively. But beyond the absurdity of such behavior, one still will ask to what extent comparing oneself with others really makes sense. Especially for those who are obsessed with the idea of "missing nothing" or of never being "out of the deal", which will oscillate permanently between regret and anxiety.

---

## Comparison

"Comparison is not reason", the saying goes. First of all, because comparison uses relative, not absolute, criteria, which makes it less objective, more biased and more partial. One invokes the singular or the particular, and not the general or the universal, which makes us fall into the trap of the bad infinite, debatable endlessly, because the real becomes thus inexhaustible. We always stick to the particular perspective. Thus the child who explains that his bad marks are less bad than those of some of his classmates certainly tempts to alleviate "parental pain", but it is still true that the grades are bad. The expression "I would rather that than..." is a common way of using comparison as justification. As for the expressions such as "It is better to hear this than to be deaf", they are ironic following the same type of structure, to say the opposite, i.e. to criticize rather than justify. Of course, the relative can be used as a criterion, the comparison may have substantial content. For example, in order to indicate a distance or size, it is a practical way of providing the information: "smaller than a hand, larger than a finger". And in the field of sport, or for any accomplishment, one will be able to marvel at what has never been done, one will admire "the first", the one who sets records. Because

here the absolute has no meaning, only the relative is an indicator worthy of the name, since it is in itself a question of competition. Moreover, to better understand the world around us, we often need to rely on concrete relations with reality known by oneself and by anyone else, that is why we compare. Analogy is another way how comparison serves as reason. But it is nevertheless necessary to examine in what proportions the analogy operates, to analyze critically whether it is not superficial, fanciful or grotesque, as shown by the historical beginnings of science, artificial syllogisms or the specious arguments of charlatans. So it is with the very popular "you too" or "you either", this fallacious argument that simply serves to discredit the interlocutor and shut them up, without proving anything about the content of the initial words or gesture apparently criticized. The last point is that comparison prevents us from seeing the intrinsic reality of a thing or a being, its reality or beauty, by comparing it to models that are supposed to capture a kind of absolute. Many people act this way towards themselves, obsessed with their own flaws, comparing themselves to an abstract ideal or to another person who is supposed to embody this ideal. This is also the case in many couples, where one compares one's spouse, often unconsciously, to a kind of perfection that can only reduce the other to a characterized deficiency.

Reason is peaceful, comfortable and cheerful; the comparison is unhappy, restless and fearful: fear of winning and fear of losing, because like in a casino, you never win in the end. The comparison is in permanent shortage, it gives only a fleeting impression of plenitude, playing on our need for certainty. It is only a means, not an end: in itself it is ultimately uninteresting, not very substantial. Of course it consoles, without always saying so, but like all consolation, it is illusory. For the comparison suffers from three fundamental problems. On the one hand, it is a question of the "more and less" that is denounced by Plato, which is slippery, relative, and does not go to the essence of things. On the other hand, it creates a system of competition, which puts us at a disadvantage in relation to others. Finally, it encloses the reflection within a given, determined and existing framework, without considering a broader perspective. It is as well for Nasruddin, for whom the mental space is saturated by the "big" square of the village, where he situates this "unheard of" that could happen, which he wants to be a part of, more than any other, because he wants to be before any other. Obsessed by this competition, obsessed by the threat of others, he does not see the emptiness or the nothingness that this main square represents.

 Questions to deepen and prolong
**Comprehension**

- Why does Nasruddin want to be the first?
- Is Nasruddin interested in others?
- Why is Nasruddin ready to suffer?
- Why is the passer-by surprised?
- What interesting things could happen in the square?
- What does the village square represent in this story?
- What does Nasruddin fear for himself?
- Is Nasruddin rational?
- What distinguishes Nasruddin from his fellow citizens?
- What vision of the world does Nasruddin represent here?

**Reflection**

- \* Why is it important to be the first?
- \* What is wrong with wanting to be the first?
- \* Why do we care about others?
- \* Can suffering be an end in itself?
- \* Why do we make assumptions?
- \* Why do we sometimes favor the hypothetical over the immediate reality?
- \* Is competition a factor of progress?
- \* Is it useful to compare oneself with others?
- \* Is the desire to compete inherent to human beings?
- \* Is anxiety a positive value?

## Chapter 2 Where is the Truth?

### Logic and conviction

As it is often the case, Nasruddin is hungry. So he goes to the butcher's and buys meat.

– You'll give me a good two kilos of leg of lamb, he asks. When he gets home, he gives the packet to Leyla, his wife, asking her to prepare his favorite dish without further delay. Meanwhile, he goes for a walk in the square, doing his business. While the dish is simmering, a few of Leyla's friends pass by, sit down and chat; then attracted by the smell of the stew, they ask her if they can taste it. Finding it delicious, flattering Leyla's culinary talents, they ask for more and Leyla can't help herself. Finally, of the whole cauldron everything is eaten. When Nasruddin goes home, hungry, rubbing his hands at the idea of the feast waiting for him, he sits and waits. Leyla does not know what to tell him. Finally, she takes a tearful look and starts whimpering in an incomprehensible way. Alarmed, Nasruddin asks for clarification and the grieving wife explains that while her back was turned, the cat hastened to eat all the meat. Nasruddin looks at her with a slightly bewildered look, then looks at the cat who is dozing quietly on the window sill.

– Bring me the scale, he asks. He weighs the cat: barely more than two kilos. He then looks at his wife straight in the eyes and asks her:

– Tell me, clever woman, if it is the cat I'm holding here, where is the meat? And if it's the meat I'm holding here, then where is the cat?

### Logics

In ancient Greek, the same term, *logos*, was used to express the two English terms "speech" and "reason". Of course, we ask ourselves the question about the legitimacy of such homonymy, which linguistic development has ended up refusing. For if Greek culture started from the principle of harmony of things and beings, this vision of the world in the West, since it was somewhat interrupted with the Christian pattern, is generally more tragic. In spite of philosophical attempts like Hegel's to reduce the fracture of being, our thinking leans rather towards difference, towards opposition. This is what the German philosopher, a partisan of identity, relegates to the side of "unhappy consciousness", which includes alienation, anguish and nostalgia. Thus modern philosophical culture, blended with psychology, particularly postmodernism, takes sides with subjec-



tive speech, in all its arbitrary, subjective and particular dimension, steeped in personal intentions. Therefore rationality takes on an external and constraining form, which is the way we often live it: it imposes on us a reality that frustrates and inhibits us, particularly with regard to knowing our identity and to gauging the value of our actions. Even if ethics would allow us to transcend this subjectivity, it often falls outside the sphere of rational discourse, for example through the concept of intersubjectivity, which only allows us to border or relativize a given subjectivity through another. Or rationality claims as well to be based on the objectivity of a knowledge, on an expertise, where critical thinking no longer plays a driving role, since it is a discourse of authority.

What happens in the dialogue between Nasruddin and his wife, which represents above all the internal fracture of thinking or of being beyond a couple's dialogue? Some may indeed find fault with the distribution of roles in this affair, between husband and wife, which might seem somewhat stereotyped or sexist, but let us invite the reader to see there instead two archetypes, two facets of the human soul, which each of us will observe within ourself. Nasruddin is not a being of pure rationality, he simply has access to the banality of common sense. In this story as in many others, he is driven mainly by his desires, by his own inertia, by his fears. In this case, he is hungry, and this hunger, this primary desire, this primary need, is at the heart of this story. It is also this hunger that will cause the "loss" of Leyla, since there lies the motive for the "crime", in her greedy friends. Nevertheless, Nasruddin knows how to move on to another register when the time comes to move beyond subjectivity. Thus, when his visibly embarrassed wife tells him a story that does not make sense, he does not get angry, he does not contradict her, he simply poses a logical problem. We find here Hegel's principle, that "what is real is rational, what is rational is real". Nasruddin's implicit argument demonstrates by the absurd that Leyla is talking nonsense. Now the presupposition of this argument is precisely that the order of the world is necessarily logical, that it is consequent and not inconsistent, that it operates according to the principle of sufficient reason, according to which nothing happens without reason or cause, which makes events somewhat predictable, insofar as one knows and understands their causes, of course. Thus, once this logical argument is stated, the story stops: one presupposes that Leyla has nothing more to say, that she can say nothing more. When logic imposes itself, when the principle of reality prevails, subjectivity is erased, it is silent, or it should be silent. Although in everyday life this is far from being the case. No doubt a "real" Leyla could have sworn that what she said was true, that she was not lying, that she did

not understand why her husband refused to believe her, she might even have shed a few tears when she complained about such a harsh, unjust, cruel and incomprehensible husband. We all have within us this solid core of subjectivity which is absolutely, as hard as iron, keen to believe what it believes, to believe what it says, a capricious and scrappy little being, capable of the most incredible bad faith.

### Subjectivity

By the way, what about the character of Leyla? As we have said, beyond the question of gender or a generic function, she represents the reductive, passive and powerless dimension of being: that part of us that cannot grow. She is the only character in the story who does not leave her home: she is therefore locked up in a pure interiority, a reality outside reality. She undergoes the world, whether it is her husband or her friends, and when she has to find an argument to get out of the bad situation she is in, she presents herself as a helpless victim. She is close to her emotions: she wants to please, she wants to appeal, she is sensitive to flattery, she fears her husband's wrath, she loses her means when she feels she is at fault. She oscillates between shame and fear. As a result, showing her insecurity, she becomes unable to tell the truth, she prefers to take refuge in bad faith, without even thinking, because in her mind survival is primordial. She comes to utter enormities, just like children, who believe what they say simply because they say it, blaming others. Thus Leyla occasionally takes the poor cat as a scapegoat.

Nasruddin can be accused of practicing the art of rhetoric, of using pseudo-scientific arguments, but above all we must note his use of irony. This irony requires the interlocutor to tear himself away from himself and his psychological heaviness in order to reflect and make a critical judgment. A practice that can certainly have a devastating effect on others, since it engenders cognitive dissonance. Leyla, already worried, embarrassed by her husband's comments, not knowing which way to turn, feels paralyzed, a poor victim who has nothing more to say. She could only reiterate by her great gods her good faith and the truthfulness of her words, but she knows that it cannot work, cannot work anymore.

"Unhappy consciousness" is an expression used by Hegel in *The Phenomenology of the Mind* which designates the feeling of frustration and powerlessness that a consciousness feels when it does not correspond to what it would like to be, when it is not recognized for what it is. It needs the world and others, that is to say the real, to confirm its power and its identity. Hegel describes the ensuing struggle to obtain this recognition, a crucial quest that

others are reluctant to embrace. Hence the importance of speech, hence the dispute and conflict, such as that between Nasruddin and Leyla where each tries to impose himself on the other through a "contest of effectiveness" between two strategies. It is therefore understandable that both are unscrupulous in their argumentation, since it is a matter of winning. It is not only the word that is at stake, but the being, or the truth. Actually, through these conflicts, each one aims at a kind of something beyond oneself, a kind of absolute, which Hegel calls "Spirit", a universal spirit. Therefore, they need each other in a conflictual and dialectical relationship, without realizing this need, which they experience as a frustration because they need to go beyond their own individuality, in which consciousness is ultimately always unhappy. Without this need, why would they have such a need to convince each other? They need to exist "for others" and not only "for themselves". It is no accident that Nasruddin, so proud of the power of his reasoning, married Leyla who is trying to survive. Like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, they both cannot live without each other: neither inside nor outside of themselves.

 Questions to deepen and prolong

### Comprehension

- Why does Leyla give in to her friends?
- Why does Leyla make up an absurd story?
- Why does Leyla present herself as a victim?
- Why is the cat a good alibi?
- What discussion strategy does Nasruddin choose?
- Why does Nasruddin choose this discussion strategy?
- Why does Nasruddin refer to Leyla as a "clever woman"?
- Is Nasruddin rational in this story?
- What does Nasruddin wish to achieve through his "demonstration"?
- What distinguishes the two characters in the story?

### Reflection

- \* Why do we lie?
- \* Why do we sometimes use outrageous arguments?
- \* Is logic a good way to argue?
- \* What is the function of irony?
- \* Can we argue rationally with an irrational person?
- \* Must we always tell the truth?
- \* Why do we want to please others?
- \* Why do we present ourselves as victims?
- \* Should we always listen to reason?
- \* Is there a diversity of logic?

## Chapter 3 The Mirror

### Reality and disappointment

On leaving his house, Nasruddin notices on the ground, in a small pile of rubbish, a shiny object that catches his eye. Actually, it is a piece of broken mirror, in which some sun rays are reflected. He picks it up and brings it close to his face to better observe it. Looking closer, he sees himself and what he sees does not please him at all. These wrinkled features, this somewhat congested face, this protruding nose, this tired look, all this distresses him deeply. Irritated, he violently rejects the piece of mirror.

– Get out of my sight, filthy thing! he exclaims. I understand now why you were thrown in the garbage!

### Brilliance

What shines attracts the eye. Shine is one of the main forms of aesthetics: it has to shine. Although in a second instance, as always in this field where subjectivity, immediacy and appearance reign, contradiction is not long in coming, and one can criticize brilliance for its glitzy, vulgar, primary, ostentatious or excessive side. Matte will then symbolize good taste, discretion or subtlety. Nevertheless, especially in children, brilliance is one of the primary forms of the beautiful. So it should not be surprising if Nasruddin, this great naive, somewhat childish character, picks up an object only because it shines. He must find his happiness in the contemplation of such a fascinating object, which he therefore wants to possess. Brilliance has brilliance, it spreads a bright and intense light, it gleams, glows and shines and thus makes a strong impression on the mind, on the imagination. Brilliance is remarkable, it cannot be ignored, it imposes itself on the eye. This is why the term brilliant has become the symbol or metaphor for people who impress us with their intelligence, creativity, success or skill. Thus we want to "shine", both for the intrinsic qualities of our person that this "brilliance" represents, but also for the recognition or notoriety it brings. In fact, criticism of the brilliance of intellect or action can focus precisely on this distinction: it is a question of showing, of showing oneself, rather than of doing. One plays the smart rather than being smart, one shows off: it is a question of shining. There is a substantial shift between a reality in itself and a quest for appearance. Such a psychological shift is quite common in human beings, insofar as we seek to enhance ourselves through the

gaze of others, a gaze that we must therefore attract by all possible means.

On the other hand, a certain hiatus in the phenomenon of "brilliance" also occurs between the subject and the object. Some objects seem to be shiny in themselves, they even come to symbolize the brilliant, therefore beautiful and perfect, i.e. the remarkable and the dazzling. This is the case of sunlight or precious stones, which seem to capture the "shine itself" in their being. The problem of such a representation arises in a second step, in the process of comparison that naturally imposes itself on our mind. This "absolutely brilliant" becomes the yardstick by which we compare everything else that is susceptible of brilliance. Yet very immediately, by a kind of legitimate and natural egocentrism, intuitively, the first object to which we will attach this ideal is the "self", the "I" which passes from the status of subject to object. Because the doubling, the consciousness of oneself, is the very condition of thought, the transcendental subject who thinks empirically. It is there that the hiatus is articulated and deepened. Because as a transcendental subject, "I" have access to perfection, to brilliance, to which "I" identify myself promptly, through a phenomenon of adhesion. By admiring "I" become admirable. But when "I" think objectively about the empirical subject that "I" am, more calmly a second time, "I" then perceive a terrible discrepancy. The perfection of the mirror allows "me" to realize the imperfection of "my" being, and at the same time condemns me to this terrible realization of the finitude of this being. It is far removed from the "brilliant in itself". The emotional shock that is derived from it, by comparison, makes me glimpse the nullity or nothingness of my existence. It is this terrifying experience that poor Nasruddin undertakes. The wonder provoked this broken mirror reflecting the blinding perfection of the sun is suddenly replaced by the sad vision of his face marked by defects, insufficiencies, ugliness, the indelible marks of time... The perfection of the mirror, the very thing that had attracted him, turns against him. The fidelity of this object, rigorous and simple reflection of reality, instrument of truth, which at first flattered his glance, strikes him by its treachery, by its insulting and violent integrity. This small piece of shaded and polished glass goes from the status of friend to that of sworn enemy. Nasruddin feels cheated, both because the vision changes radically in nature, and because the message sent becomes much more personal. A bit like when the contemplation of a pleasant idea about the order of the world turns towards us, challenging us personally. "What about you in all this?" he asks us. But we hardly wish to be so apostrophized. Contemplation of the absolute suits us as long as it does not lead us to confront the miserable and derisory dimension of our being.

## Disappointment

We laugh at Nasruddin, without really knowing why, intuitively. It is a reflection of Schopenhauer that will help us understand the comedy of the case. "No one can see over oneself, by which I mean that one cannot see in others more than what is oneself". Namely that the end was foreseeable. At the same time the punch line of the narration, this last moment which, like a high point, gives meaning or depth to the unfolding of events. But also the fall of Nasruddin, his disappointment, his desolation, as well as the ensuing movement of anger. "All that glitters is not gold", says the proverb. The brilliant is also the superficial, that which lacks substance, because if perception is charged with effects, the effect can be deceptive. Thus in the aesthetic field, such as music, the brilliant aspect of the work or the interpretation will be opposed to the poetic dimension, more subtle, richer in nuances, more spiritual. But Nasruddin is a child, ingenuous, gullible and superficial: he opts for the naivety of the immediate. He is not attracted by the finesse of the flora or the delicate sinuities of the path, he prefers the coarse and the trivial: he opts for brilliance, shrill and boisterous. How could he not be disappointed? No matter what he does, he can only find himself again, even when he is ecstatic about what he is not. And here Schopenhauer's deep intuition makes sense, which implies, among other things, "tell me what you admire, and I'll tell you who you are". The mirror sends us back to ourselves, in a dialectical shift in which we can both perceive and transcend the immediate of the real, but in return undergo the reductive perception of our miserable identity. One will understand then how this very human faculty to alternate the absolute and the particular will naturally generate a succession of "maniac" then "depressive" states. The mirror is the prism of omnipotence, and from this omnipotence we can envisage the reduction of our being.

As a conclusion, we can think of the queen of "Snow White" who asks the mirror "Who is the most beautiful?" hoping that the mirror will confirm what is expected. But alas, mirrors are ruthless. And one can understand the murderous rage in the poor woman's heart when she is outraged to learn that it is her "sworn enemy" who is in fact the most beautiful, naturally. This anger is commensurate with the trust she places in this mirror, a perfect reflection of the world, since she hardly suspects it of making a mistake or lying. Nasruddin, more cynical or more naive, more complacent perhaps, prefers to doubt the value of his piece of glass, rejecting it back to the garbage. Very human, he prefers to blame the bearer of bad news. We do not like our own image, it is indeed better to destroy everything related to it. Self-knowledge is possible, but we must support the cruel look in the mirror, whatever is its

nature. Physical mirror or spiritual mirror, mirror of the glance of others, it is still necessary to be able to support the reflection of it.



 Questions to deepen and prolong
**Comprehension**

- Why is Nasruddin attracted by the shiny object?
- What did Nasruddin hope for when he picked up the piece of mirror?
- What displeases Nasruddin in this piece of mirror?
- Why does Nasruddin become violent?
- What does the pile of rubbish represent?
- What does the mirror represent in this story?
- What does the sun symbolize?
- Why does Nasruddin exclaim: "Out of my sight"?
- How does Nasruddin feel about himself?
- What is the moral of this story?

**Reflection**

- \* Why are we attracted by what shines?
- \* Why do we like to look at ourself in a mirror?
- \* Why do we have a problem with our appearance?
- \* Is the truth unkind?
- \* Why are we fascinated by the absolute?
- \* Why do we want to remove or destroy what displeases us?
- \* Can we reconcile with reality?
- \* Can we see ourself as we are?
- \* Should we accept ourself as we are?
- \* Is it difficult to love ourself?

## Chapter 4 Shame

### The look of others and the conception of oneself

A thief broke into Nasruddin's home. He searches everywhere, but so far finds nothing interesting. Finally, he arrives in a small room where he sees a cupboard. When he opens it, he is surprised to discover the Hodja, all hunched up.

The thief, dumbfounded, says to him:

- What are you doing there? I came to your house because I was thirsty, and not meeting anyone, I wondered who lived here.
- I thought you were a thief, the Hodja replied. So as soon as I heard you, I hid.
- Oh, you did! Were you scared? asked the thief.
- No, I was rather ashamed.
- Ashamed! But ashamed of what?
- I was ashamed because in fact there is nothing at all to steal from my house.

### Shame

Shame is a complex feeling that mixes in particular sadness, embarrassment and guilt, with their collateral feelings, such as helplessness, anger, despair, etc. We are sad to see what we are, how we are, far from what we consider to be a normal or ideal way of existing or behaving. Although out of empathy this sadness can be caused by the situation or actions of others: we can feel ashamed for someone else, especially if they are close to us. We are embarrassed when we feel we are in a strange or uncomfortable situation, where we do not know what attitude to take or how to act. The feeling of love, by the fact that it destabilizes us psychologically, produces such an embarrassment, among other things because our anchoring is shaken as we are invaded by a complex mixture of desire, fear, joy and sorrow. Shame, by the disorder it causes, worries us. It takes away all legitimacy or value, it prevents us from acting; it makes us uncomfortable and we do not know what to do. We do not dare to do anything, and any initiative seems unwelcome to us a priori. Shyness is one of the most widespread forms of shame. Shame is not attached to a specific act but to the totality of our being: we are ashamed of existing. Although shyness can be more particularly revealed in certain situations, it will generally manifest itself by a timorous behavior, but it will also sometimes express itself by a haughty or aggressive attitude, which seems contradictory but is not: self-

shame is polymorphous. As for guilt, it is an unhappy feeling generated by the conviction of having spoken words or committed actions that we think are morally wrong, erroneous or silly, specific facts that we find difficult to assume. Although here again, guilt can be generated by the simple fact that we exist, by the existence in itself or by a specific way of existing, as in the case of the original sin for all mankind or that of belonging to a low social group.

In this story, Nasruddin feels belittled by the fact that he is poor, which means that he is socially inferior and personally demeaned. As a result, he loses all legitimacy, he no longer dares to show himself to the eyes of others, especially in his intimacy, and as a last recourse or escape strategy, he hides, the ultimate option of the shameful person. Victor Hugo's poem on Cain describes this fratricidal character, archetype of guilt, fleeing from the eyes of others, until his last resort: he hides in a tomb, where no one will be able to see him and remind him of his misery. Alas, no one can escape his own conscience and the burden of universality that it brings with it. A reality that is captured in a terrible way in the last line of the poem: "The eye (of God/ was in the grave looking at Cain". The ridiculous thing about the story of the Hodja, who as usual pushes the excesses of our humanity to the point of caricature, is that even in his own home, the shameful loses all legitimacy to the point of leaving the space open to the intruder who objectively is the one who has no rights here. But this intruder seems on the contrary to be devoid of any moral sense, he is barefaced and shameless: he knows only his desire and the efficiency that accompanies it. Thus he who has no valid reason to be ashamed flees from the gaze of the one who should be ashamed but is not: he only knows the expedient and the lie that accompanies it. A last general point about shame, which can nevertheless enhance the character of the Hodja comparatively, is that this feeling has a double connotation, positive and negative. We have seen its negativity in the sense that it devalues the subject, confuses him and prevents him from acting. But we must not forget that shame is an indispensable facet of the moral sense, a sense that seems to be totally lacking in the thief. This moral sense is precisely a constitutive feeling of our humanity: it demonstrates our capacity to access the idea of good and evil. Whatever is the form of this moral or ethical feeling, it shows that we are aware of the nature and consequences of our thoughts, words and actions, i.e. their reality.

---

### Awareness

There is another dimension of this story that we must emphasize. Nasruddin is at home, he is the master of the place. The intruder has no right here, not at all. Nevertheless, this intruder seems to take a kind of moral and

psychological ascendancy. And one can wonder where he gets such power, what is the dynamic of it. Sartre offers us an effective explanation. The experience of shame is an important aspect of our relationship with others. Shame is shame of oneself, but in relation to another consciousness, be it an actual presence or an intellectual representation of that presence. For there to be shame, I have to recognize myself in this image that the other sends back to me. The other thus becomes the revelator of my identity: he is "the intermediary between me and myself". One thus understands the ascendancy that he can have over me, as in the case of the thief in this story who has a hold on Nasruddin. Even more, the other, however singular he may be, as a mirror of my own subjectivity or singularity, becomes the spokesman of humanity, hence the power of his gaze. Certainly he is as well singular, but this intersubjectivity opens the door to universality, to reality, by the simple fact that it transcends the reductive dimension of our inner world. We intuitively perceive that the exterior is infinitely greater than our interiority, meaning that "the world" is more objective, more substantial, more real than "my world". But here again lies the difference between the thief and Nasruddin. For the first, devoid of moral sense, others have no legitimacy, except the very arbitrary legitimacy that society grants them. Thus the right to property, which implies for example respect for others, has no interest or value in itself for the thief. Only "my world" exists for him, unlike Nasruddin, who overvalues everything that is not "my world", since he himself is a priori devoid of value: he is ashamed of himself. In a more tragic way, let us think here of what is explained by Primo Levi, a Holocaust survivor who recounts how some prisoners in the death camps ended up being ashamed of themselves, while they were victims of shameless executioners.

 Questions to deepen and prolong

### Comprehension

- Does Nasruddin believe the story of the thief?
- Why is Nasruddin ashamed of himself?
- What does Nasruddin expect from hiding?
- Is the thief ashamed of himself?
- Why is the thief surprised to find Nasruddin in the cupboard?
- Is Nasruddin a liar?
- Is Nasruddin afraid of the thief?
- What is the twist in this story?
- Is Nasruddin a victim?
- What is the difference between Nasruddin's personality and the thief's?

### Reflection

- \* Can individuals be judged on the basis of what they possess?
- \* Why is poverty perceived as degrading?
- \* Why are we ashamed of who we are?
- \* Is it necessary to experience shame?
- \* Can we be ashamed for others?
- \* Is shame an obstacle to thinking?
- \* Can shame be seen as an expression of narcissism?
- \* Are blatant lies effective?
- \* Why do we fear the intrusion of others?
- \* Is nerve a form of courage?

## Chapter 5 Truth or Death

### Descriptive and performative speech

One day the king decided to wage war on lies. He decreed that all his subjects should tell only the truth. A gallows was erected at the entrance of the city to test them. A herald announced that anyone entering the city would first have to answer a question submitted to him, and anyone who lied would be hanged immediately. When the measures were established, no one dared to enter or leave the terrible gate. As soon as he heard this announcement, Hodja Nasruddin, as ingenuous or shrewd as ever, rushed out. He took two steps outside the city and then pretended to return. In accordance with his instructions, the captain of the guard asked him a question.

- Where are you going? Tell us the truth, or we'll hang you to death!
- I am going to that gallows, said Nasruddin, to be hanged.
- I do not believe you. You are a liar!
- Very well, if I told a lie, let me hang immediately!

They say that the captain always wondered whether to follow up on this answer and that the king to whom the incident was told abandoned his plan to tell the truth for all.

### Truth

The naive of this story is undoubtedly not Nasruddin, who as usual plays on the foolishness of his fellow citizens and his own foolishness. As the reader will have sensed, it is the king who is the jester of the story. In the first place, because he believes that truth is a kind of evidence, and that every statement is true or false according to determined and identifiable criteria. Second, because he believes that a given person can set himself up as the supreme judge of truth, capable of distinguishing for sure what is true from what is false. Of course, there are certain situations in which one can indeed judge whether an assertion is false, but this will still be in relation to specific premises, in relation to a particular context, even if this judgment is based on common sense. It seems to us that this does not mean that we should fall into the trap of "to each his own truth", a thesis that advocates radical relativism, in which each person decrees true what suits them. Such a perspective, which can be criticized as coming from a "lazy" reason, in fact totally eliminates the concept of truth. Of course, there are many reasons to criticize the concept of

truth, but it would seem a pity to us to eliminate it entirely because it remains in the end a powerful and operative concept, allowing us to base many useful judgments on many levels, that of everyday life or epistemology, and many others. The common temptation to replace the "Truth" with a "capital t", i.e. single, by "truths" said with a "lower case t", i.e. multiple, does not allow us to deal with the problem either. Unless we specify how the concept of "truth", whether single or multiple, can fit the issue and play its role. It will therefore still be a matter of defining the term, articulating it, and trying to avoid falling into the trap of total indetermination, where words no longer mean anything because they no longer hold any common meaning. It is easy to slip into an "it depends" where one ignores the nature of "dependence" and the connection it implies. Of course there are several conceptions of truth, but we still need to know them, on the one hand to be aware of our way of thinking, and on the other hand to examine to what extent the given definition can be applied, in general and in a particular case.

Let us take a look at some of the problems or distinctions that underlie the concept of truth. First, there are two broad categories of truth: truths of fact and truths of reason. The first category applies when a statement is true because it corresponds to the reality it describes. This involves, for example, confronting the statement with the corresponding phenomenon, which must confirm it. For example: "Peter is at home". The second applies when a statement is true by virtue of the relation of coherence or implication between its terms. This is what we find, among others, in syllogisms or all logical constructions. For example: "This dog must eat or it will die, because animals must eat in order to survive". The first category is more about observation, the second is about reasoning, since this is not verifiable at that time. Leibniz thought that a factual truth might not be true, whereas a truth of reason would always be true.

Another distinction is between truths of necessity and truths of contingency. Some statements are true because they are necessary, any opposition or alternative being impossible. For example, "A plane square has four sides". Other statements are true in a contingent way: they are only possible or probable, i.e. they depend on specific conditions without which they will be false. For example: "Every mammal has two parents". This is probably true, it is usually the case, but cloning, although still rare, allows us to escape this rule. This is the difference between an absolute statement and a generality: the first does not tolerate exceptions, the second allows it. This is a mistake often made by wrongly objecting "it is not always true" to a generality. In this case, it would be a matter of proving that it is rarely true in order to constitute a

valid objection.

A third distinction about truth is between philosophers, or thinking, of the absolute or objective and those of the relative or the subjective. Thus the sophists thought that knowledge resides entirely in the perspective and opinion of each individual. Thus there would be no single truth, but truths. This is what we find in the idea of certain Anglo-Saxon philosophers, who state that what is true is what suits us. On the other hand, there is the idealistic current, those who like Plato think that we can know what things are in themselves, objectively, independently of any particular opinion. Some thinkers oscillate between the two, or combine them, in different ways. Nevertheless, even for relativistic philosophers, one will encounter the quest for a certain principle of coherence or demonstration work, which differs from what we have called "lazy relativism" and allows a certain conception of truth to operate, even if it would not be named so.

A fourth distinction relates to the problem of whether there are unquestionable truths. For example, for Descartes, there are "primary truths", such as "I think, therefore I am", which derives from a work of pure reason, but other philosophers such as Bachelard assert that there are no primary truths, but only "primary errors". This difference is also found between Kant's and Hegel's thought. For the first, there are certain assertions that cannot be contested, in particular those relating to transcendental reason, since these statements condition the rest of the thinking, they constitute the basis of it. Whereas for Hegel, it is always possible and necessary to carry out a work of criticism and negation in order to accomplish a reflection worthy of the name. Probably because the first is a thinker of difference, of the irreducible, the second is a thinker of identity, of unity.

---

### Performative

Let us now examine how Nasruddin short-circuited the royal decree on truth. Without realizing it, the king's injunction contains certain specific presuppositions, on the one hand disputable, but on the other hand objectively opposable. For it was not by expressing a difference of opinion that Nasruddin opposed the king— quite the contrary, since he was complying with the rule— but by opposing him in a performative manner, that is, by an "action of speech". He proved via absurdity the impossibility of such an instruction. This is, moreover, generally the strategy of these anecdotes, which consist in raising the level of thinking by showing the limits of common thinking. The first presupposition of the royal injunction is to think that a truth is absolute: it is valid for everyone at all times and in all places, it does not depend on per-



spectives or circumstances, it is categorical. The second presupposition is that this "truth" is verifiable, by reason or by observation, and that this verification can be made by anyone, such as a regimental captain, who is not a "scholar". Moreover, it can be verified immediately, since the judgment must be made in the moment. Of course, the most incongruous presupposition is the one that consists in thinking that everyone knows the truth and can state it without making mistakes, which is a phantasm and an illusion.

In opposition to this, Nasruddin produces a complex truth, which shatters the presuppositions in question. First, his truth is contingent: it is about the future, and therefore subject to a certain arbitrariness: it is not a matter of necessity. It is not absolute but conditional: it may or may not prove to be right or wrong, depending on the circumstances. It is an "a posteriori" truth and not an "a priori" truth: its truthfulness can only be verified afterwards but not in the moment. Thus it escapes a categorical "true or false", since it is conditional and temporal. Secondly, it states an "unthinkable", from the point of view of reason: "I am going to that gallows to be hanged", since a sane person does not wish to be hanged, which is the captain's presupposition. This is why the captain does not "believe" it. Thirdly, when the captain asks a question about Nasruddin's "sincere" intention, his desire, Nasruddin responds with a "prediction", based on his understanding of the order of the world. Now the question "where are you going?" can as well be treated by a "truth of intention" as by a "truth of prediction". Fourth, Nasruddin reverses cause and effect. For the captain asks the cause of "movement", of "going", while Nasruddin offers him a consequence in response: he will be hanged as a consequence of his lie, since in truth he does not wish to be hanged. This logical short-circuit has the effect of producing a vicious circle in the captain's mind and destroying the belief system on which he was based. As a result, he becomes incapable of making a decision, since no logical consequences are applicable. If he does not hang Nasruddin, Nasruddin has lied and should be hanged. If he hangs Nasruddin, then Nasruddin tells the truth and should not be hanged.

Fifth, the consequence, hanging, which is "outside" the reasoning that is being judged, suddenly becomes part of the reasoning: it becomes a constituent element of it, since it is one of the possible truths or lies, instead of being an "external" consequence. The judgment on the truthfulness of a proposition cannot be contained in that proposition: this distorts the deal, makes it impossible to judge. The consequence cannot be reduced to the status of a means of reasoning. We find here the classical paradoxes of the genre: "I am a liar", where the content alters or alienates itself. This proposition is an undecid-

able, one cannot declare it either true or false. This situation thus generates a certain confusion, a logical break. The various analyses evoked can certainly overlap, they attempt in common to examine the problem posed to the "truth principle" from different angles. Whether they are truths of reason, experience, or subjectivity or otherwise, they are necessarily subjected to problematization through various types of objection. But one of the most powerful tests of the "true" remains undoubtedly the confrontation with the performative.

 Questions to deepen and prolong
**Comprehension**

- Why would the king wage war on lies?
- Why would the punishment be so severe?
- Why are people afraid to go through the gate?
- Can the captain know if people lie?
- Why does Nasruddin rush to take up the test?
- What technique does Nasruddin use to escape the test?
- Why does the captain call Nasruddin a liar?
- Does Nasruddin's answer have several meanings?
- Why is the captain then puzzled?
- Why does the king abandon his project of "truth for all"?

**Reflection**

- \* Are there different kinds of truth?
- \* Do we have the right to demand that someone tell the truth?
- \* How do we know if someone is telling the truth or not?
- \* Is it always desirable to know the truth?
- \* Is it always possible to tell the truth?
- \* Why does lying have a bad reputation?
- \* What is the function of a lie?
- \* Is ingenuity a quality?
- \* Is it possible to predict the future?
- \* Is the human being predictable?

## Chapter 6 The Good and the Bad

### Morality and judgment

A student of Nasruddin asked him one day:

– Hodja, a lot of people say you are good. Does that mean that you are really good?

The teacher explained to him that it was not necessarily so and that people could be wrong. The student insisted:

– And if everyone said you were bad, they could not be wrong anyway.

The Hodja said no again, which annoyed his student somewhat. Seeing the effect of his words on the poor boy, Nasruddin changed his strategy.

– The thing is very complicated, he announced. If good people say I'm good, then I must be really good. And if bad people say I'm bad, then I have to be really good too.

He then paused and smoothed his beard. Then seeing his student's puzzled face, he continued:

– At the same time, it is true that it is very difficult to decide which people are good and which are bad.

### Authority

Good and evil, good and bad, are concepts that are very present in our thinking, which allow us to make judgments about the value of things and beings, but above all allow us to guide the course of our actions by guiding our decisions. The problem is to define this "good" and this "evil" to determine what criteria to use and how to use them, in particular to decide under what circumstances they are appropriate or not. The most common pattern in this area, the one that is often applied intuitively, like the student in this story, is common sense: what most people think. After all, as he says, one naturally trusts the greatest number, one bends to the majority opinion, and unanimity could hardly be wrong. The student does not understand how his teacher could refuse such an obvious argument, especially since at first the judgment evoked is rather flattering, since it is a question of supporting the idea that Nasruddin is a good man. The student's irritation even pushes him to raise the hypothesis that "if everyone said you were bad, they couldn't be wrong". Indeed, who could bear such antisocial, devoid of common-sense, inconvenient behavior, which is unbearable for anyone!

Thus, the greater number constitutes a kind of authority argument defined by the mass, which allows the individual to avoid personal judgment, but there are other authorities. For example, religious authority, the existence of a God and his commandments, a presence whose absence would make some people doubt the very possibility of morality. The implicit underlying principle is that morality is not natural, because being the product of effort, it is difficult: only the establishment of a sacred, with all its coercive, dogmatic and aesthetic apparatus, is able to oblige humans to act well. Religion, with its ideal, its power structure and its sanctions, allows everyone to overcome their subjective inclinations and personal opinions, thus providing a regulating ideal to society and the individual, whether through seduction or force. Moral authority can also come under a secular schema, under any ideology or custom, which can impose itself just as categorically as the religious schema, as different political regimes throughout history have shown, for example. Nevertheless, there is a notable difference between "written", theorized and specified morals, and more informal morals, which are transmitted by the tradition and the way of being of a society. Although it is often observed that these two types of morals can operate in parallel and even sometimes contradict each other. This is the case in those societies where religious dogma criticizes the pursuit of material goods and the instinct of competition, while common morality, for example in parental education, encourages children to acquire goods and to be the best. In any case, the problem of authority always arises in the problem of morality, since it is a question of imposing, generally collectively, rules of conduct.

---

## Morals

There are different types of morals, hence, as Nasruddin points out, the difficulty of "deciding which people are good and which are bad". Let us try to delimit some of them.

There is first an important distinction that allows us to categorize the articulations of morality: on the one hand "objectivist" moralities, on the other hand "relativist" moralities. In the objectivist case one bases oneself either on "natural laws", or on "divine revelations", or on the principles of "universal reason". We find the principle of "natural law" in particular in Ancient Greek philosophy, in Chinese Taoism, and in certain Anglo-Saxon thinkers such as Hobbes or Darwin. Of course, since visions of nature are not the same, moral principles differ just as much. For Ancient Greece, we take as an example the "nothing too much" of the temple of Delphi, a principle that criticizes excess and demesure, since it is a question of integrating into natural harmony. For Taoism, it is above all a question of letting the "Way" operate, in the world and

in oneself, without trying to interfere through our will and desires. In Hobbes, there is a "state of nature" in which "man is a wolf to man". Opposite this is a need to establish a "law of nature", that is, social and moral constraints ordered by reason, such as "don't do to others what you think is unreasonable for others to do to you".

The morality of "revelation" is found in particular in the religions of the Abrahamic scriptures, among others with the Ten Commandments or the Decalogue, such as "thou shalt not kill", whose observance guarantees us salvation, but also in other religions such as Buddhism, which advocates "The Noble Way", a path that leads to the cessation of suffering by avoiding the pursuit of pleasures as well as mortification. The morality based on "universal reason" is found in particular in Kant, with its flagship principle of the "categorical imperative": "Act only according to the maxim by which you can want it to become a universal law". He offers us a scheme by which we can put any moral principle to the test: universality. It is the same with Nietzsche's "eternal return" that— in spite of its surpassing of "good and evil"— invites us to evaluate our decisions by asking ourselves if we would be ready to act in this way for all eternity.

Relativist moralities, on the other hand, are rather the result of an arbitrary choice: that of a society, a group or an individual, who states them as he sees fit. There is no pretension of universality or eternity, and some specify that it is a question of ethics rather than morality, since there is no ontological or anthropological basis for it. It admits change, and diversity can only be based on agreement among the people involved. Some critics see in such a scheme the establishment of a dictatorship of the majority. But in any case, in any moral conception there is always some form of imposition, since it is a question of establishing a mode of action or founding values that are considered optimal, more legitimate or more effective.

There is another important distinction, where three forms oppose each other: morality or ethics based on virtue, on the consequences of actions, or on a deontology. The first is based on the intrinsic qualities of the person, on his willingness to act well, on his personal motivations more than on the nature of his actions. It is a question, for example, of promoting courage, kindness, honesty, prudence, generosity and the other, in order to realize oneself, to lead a good life, to be wise and happy, and thereby enable others to do the same. The second is mainly concerned with the wellbeing generated by the actions envisaged, which must be maximized. It is the results that prevail, the effects on society. Such a consequentialist vision is inspired by utilitarianism, which determines the value of an action by the intensity and the net increase in

happiness that it provokes, that is to say the maximizing of pleasure and the minimizing of pain, in the line of the English philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Nevertheless, it could also be a question of considering as a moral consequence the fulfillment of life, the embellishment of the world, justice or equality, or even a set of values, more or less contradictory, which should be prioritized. The third moral or ethical conception is called deontological. In deontology, any action must be judged moral insofar as it conforms to certain established duties, to certain codified actions. It is not so much the attitude or the motivations or the consequences that count, but the respect of the rules. This is almost a juridical conception of morality. There are principles such as reciprocity: do unto others as you would have them do unto you; non-maleficence: do not harm others unnecessarily; fidelity: abide by your commitments; or gratitude: thank those who have helped you. Ethics serve as an operational framework for many social groups, especially professionals.

### Uncertainty

As for the "complication" of the problem that Nasruddin carries out, it relates to the coherence between words, acts and personality or character. Only those who are good can say what is good, the bad ones find good the bad ones: their judgement is distorted, they are incompetent, or they project their own nature. The problem remains that of producing a judgment to distinguish between those who are good and those who are bad. Nevertheless, it seems that Nasruddin's vision tends more towards a morality of virtue, since it is the qualities of the person that determine the adequacy of his judgment. This makes sense, inasmuch as the main problem in Nasruddin's stories consists essentially in making the subject work on himself. It is thus a question of knowing who speaks in order to know the value of his word. Another aspect of Nasruddin's response is a kind of irony about the perception of others, which can be characterized as complacency, which is quite common. His logic can be summed up as follows: "Those who say I am good are good, those who say I am bad are bad. So I am definitely good." This comes under the principle attributed to William James, according to which "The true consists simply in what is advantageous for our thinking", a principle that is operative especially for morals, because we greatly appreciate having a good conscience. Thus we see Nasruddin oscillating between a kind of contentment with himself, this "lazy" thinking that he affects so much, and an uncertainty as to the possibility of making a proper judgment. In this he resembles us, because on moral issues we oscillate between the complacency of good conscience, this feeling of being on the right side of things, and doubt about the value of our being and our

actions, especially when we are subject to remorse or shame. We can also ask ourselves, seeing how the Hodja responds to his pupil, if morality is a reasoning, or an intuition, a conviction, a feeling. Because the teacher does not seem to be really affected by the ratiocinations of his pupil, nor moreover by the judgments of others. Here perhaps lies his wisdom, in this "lazy reason", which could easily be called amoralism. This would explain the final ambiguity of the story, as an answer to the student's quest for certainties. The problem of morality remains an open question, since it is above all a matter of personal choices, of existential options.



 Questions to deepen and prolong
**Comprehension**

- Why does the student wonder about Nasruddin's kindness?
- Why does the student wonder about the common judgment of Nasruddin's kindness?
- Why does the student trust the common judgment about meanness?
- Why does Nasruddin answer the first two questions in the negative?
- Why does the student become irritated with the first two answers?
- Why is the student perplexed by Nasruddin?
- What is Nasruddin trying to make his student understand?
- Is Nasruddin a sophist in this story?
- Does Nasruddin make fun of his pupil?
- Does Nasruddin seem to think that he is good or bad?

**Reflection**

- \* Why do we care about other people's opinions?
- \* Can we rely on common sense?
- \* Must we rely on our own judgment?
- \* Why do we seek certainty?
- \* Is it necessary to be good in order to judge what is good?
- \* Is moral judgment necessary?
- \* What right do we have to judge others?
- \* Can we objectively judge whether someone is good or bad?
- \* How do we define good and evil?
- \* Can evil be good?

## Chapter 7 Cunning

### Ruse and intelligence

There was a man who thought he was very cunning. Having heard about Nasruddin Hodja, he decided to go and challenge him to see who was the more cunning of the two.

When he arrived in the village, he saw a man standing against a wall. He asked him if he knew where the Hodja lived.

– “What do you want with him?” the man asked.

– “I would like to meet him to compare myself with him, because he is said to be very cunning, but I am also cunning.”

The man looked at him for a moment, without moving. Then answered him:

– “Stay there, I’ll go get him. But lean on this wall, it might fall down. The men of the village take turns holding it in place before repairing it. Hold it until I come back.”

And so it was done, and the visitor sat against the wall.

But time passed and the villager still did not return. Eventually, more men who were returning from the fields arrived. They asked the stranger what he was doing there against the wall, and the stranger explained the situation to them. When he had finished telling them, they laughed loudly. Then one of them said to the poor man, who was disconcerted:

– “Poor fool! You don’t even realize that you have already met Nasruddin Hodja!”

### Ruse

Ruse is a recurring theme in Nasruddin’s stories. Certainly, it provokes laughter, but it also has other reasons for being, which however are part of making us laugh. In other words, there are certain issues that are at the heart of “laughing”. What is ruse? It is a clever way to deceive your opponent. It allows us to achieve our ends without force, without direct conflict. It is indirect, it involves rather trickery, skill, or stratagem. It is indeed a confrontation, but it is not a matter of hardness and impetuosity: it is rather a matter of finesse and subterfuge. If it is opposed to force, it also requires tenacity, courage, determination, resistance... For there is no ruse without an adversary, without an “other” whom it is a question of deceiving and manipulating. It is a strategic modality, well known in the military or combat art, where deception, concealment and diversion are practiced as tactics among others. Some people

will disdain it because its ultimate resort is cheating, lying, dishonesty, unlike open and direct combat, where honor and bravery are honored.

As a defense of ruse, we attest to the intelligence it requires. We defend the idea that fighting without risk is a less flamboyant, but a wiser posture. The cunning person must have both a prudent and sharp mind in order to properly measure each of his actions: their nature, their temporality, their form, etc. He must understand how his opponent works, anticipate his actions and reactions, i.e., his weaknesses, since a person's predictability, his lack of creativity, is precisely the angle through which he can be "attacked". While the cunning person must be unpredictable and surprising: that's where his skill resides. His knowledge is extensive, his know-how is vast. To do well, he must know the past, have experience of humans in general and his opponent in particular. As in the practice of martial arts, he must perceive the present with acuity, nothing must escape him, without being obsessed by it. But the future also belongs to him, he must foresee the contingency of events, he is able to manage new and unpredictable situations. Certainly he has a goal, but this goal must not obsess him, otherwise he will become rigid and blind, he will trap himself. This is moreover the reason why the foreigner falls into Nasruddin's trap: he wants to win too much, he becomes "stupid".

---

### Amoralism

The ancient Greek hero of ruse par excellence is Odysseus, the one "with a thousand tricks", endowed with the *Métis*, this "cunning intelligence" that made him very useful to his people during the Trojan War. Among the most famous feats of arms of Odysseus are the idea of the "Trojan horse" and the fight against the Cyclops Polyphemus. The first takes the form of a gift from the gods to an enemy intruder. Certainly the idea is original, because it implies that the Trojans themselves bring the enemy inside the city. In other words, they themselves become the agents of their own loss. On the other hand, the alleged divine nature of the "gift" underlines the bold or even brazen dimension of the initiative.

The cunning person is unscrupulous, he is expedient, everything is good to achieve his ends: he must be inventive and voluntaristic. He is amoral in the sense that he does not care about established or customary rules of conduct that command to do good and avoid evil: lying and cheating, for example, do not bother him much. Or else, his morality is elsewhere, as in the warrior, who has to win his fight above all, a goal that by definition is just, which implies destroying an enemy who represents the obstacle to this justice. In this sense, we are witnessing a redefinition of morality, henceforth

subject to a higher goal authorizing the transgression of the usual rules. The Fight of Odysseus against Polyphemus captures the very idea of the conflict between force and ruse. Polyphemus is a giant, he is powerful, he has only one eye, which shows his lack of perspective or clairvoyance. Moreover, he is anthropophagous, which shows his barbarity; he lives alone, which shows his primitive side; and he does not practice agriculture, which represents his lack of civilization. Nothing prevents him from devouring one by one Odysseus and his companions, if not his own stupidity, his naivety. An interesting aspect of this story is the name of "Nobody" that Odysseus grants himself, which is at the heart of the mockery of the poor Cyclops. The fact of being "nobody" is a crucial aspect of the trick: it is about being plastic, about not fixing one's being, one's appearance or one's way of acting. The cunning person has many faces. In a sense, he is nobody because he is polymorphic. The origin of the term "person" also refers to the Greek theater, where it designated the mask of the actor, a rigid figure indicating the nature of the character thus represented. The cunning person changes his appearance as he pleases, which makes him unpredictable. This plasticity is also what allows him to capture the functioning of his opponent. He must succeed in getting into the other's shoes, adopting his vision of the world to know how he sees, to see what he sees and what he does not see. Thus, Odysseus is "Nobody" in the sense that he is nothing predefined. He is everything, since he is transformed, constantly metamorphosing, as we observe in the *Odyssey*. This polymorphism allows him to escape from the demons— those evil forces of the Greek world— his permanent transformation is the very condition of his survival, indeed of his existence, since it defines him.

At the same time, the flip side of the coin is that the cunning person is devoid of principles, because principles articulate a determined personality. Morality remains an obligation, it provides stability. Moreover, as with any form of power, the *hybris*, feeling of omnipotence, awaits. For this reason, Aristotle warns us against the excess of "flexibility" of such a man, who can easily become a rascal. It is enough for his own interests to take precedence over any other purpose. Thus it is the case with Odysseus, who took for an enemy Palamedes. On the one hand because Palamedes, just as cunning, had discovered and shown the madness that Odysseus was faking in order not to go to war, and on the other hand because he had shown the perfidy of Odysseus when he had to supply the army. To take his revenge, Odysseus had Palamedes condemned to death using an odious machination. However, this Palamedes, a fine mind, is reputed to be the inventor of the game of chess, arithmetic, dice games and fire signals used to transmit a message, even letters

and numbers. Regardless of the objective reality of the character, this part of the story of Odysseus shows the corruptible dimension of the character. It shows how the cunning one, somewhat with neither faith nor law, is tempted by immoderation: by acting as he pleases, to defend his own interests. This remains a problematic aspect of the character of Odysseus: his intelligence is lively, but he is somehow too human.

### Attitude

Now let us come back to our story. We are dealing with a "shrewd" man who thinks he is very good, very clever. And like all those who think they are better than others, he wants to measure himself. Both to exercise his power, to prove that he is the best, and no doubt to reassure himself, because beings who are in a competitive mode always doubt their status and their power. He wants to prove himself, enough to come all the way to Nasruddin's village, since the latter has acquired a reputation that the "smart" envies. The desire for recognition is obviously present. Alas for him, his enterprise is a failure, perhaps it was meant to fail. He is checkmate before he has even been able to advance his first piece. How can this situation be explained?

The idea that the first man he would meet, the man in front of him, was Nasruddin, has not even crossed his mind. Moreover, the idea that taking turns holding a wall to prevent it from falling down is completely absurd has not crossed his mind either. Yet it is a well-known principle of martial arts or game tactics: if you think too much about what you want, what you want to do, you do not see what is going on, you do not see your opponent and the blows he is preparing to deliver. In other words, you rush headlong because you are too focused on your goal. In addition, there is a classic weakness of those who think they are very good at what they do: they underestimate their opponent, they lower their guard when they should be wary. This man's mind is too full, too determined, too obsessive. He is full of himself, of his desires, of his fears, and because of this, he is not "nobody": he lacks lightness, plasticity, freedom, he is too "himself", too "somebody".

The traditional art of the master is precisely to surprise the student by showing him that he is not mentally ready. He is not present enough, and finds himself on the ground before he has even understood what was happening. Furthermore, the ruse doesn't like to be called by name, it doesn't announce itself: it is practiced, discreetly, efficiently. Naming it destroys it, makes it impotent, since it is a surprise. On the other hand, the trick cannot be measured, it is precisely out of proportion. This excess is justified when it is a way of being, when it is not submitted to a will, to a goal. When it is,

very simply. To want to measure ruse, to instrumentalize it in order to valorize oneself, is to show one's facticity, one's lie, one's illusion. What is easy and natural for us does not engender the urgency of comparison, it does not provoke jealousy or envy, contrary to what is instrumentalized. Besides, we compare our lacks, not abundance: the latter is self-sufficient. Unless we want to confront ourself. Our real actions overflow from ourself, driven by our own power, because they are a gift, a way of being, and not sordid calculations.

If one can openly defy someone by force, one cannot do it by trickery, since it is precisely a matter of not "saying", of not "warning". Nasruddin was ready, he did nothing, said nothing, his opponent did too much, said too much, wanted too much. He is a doer. He wanted to be cunning, which prevented him from being cunning. He was in intention, not in action. Nasruddin is in ruse, he lives in it, it is his being, whereas for the visitor, ruse is an "outside" activity, not a way of life. Nasruddin is cunning even within himself, with himself. The other is cunning only for others, for specific purposes, in specific moments, which shows that this quality is not intrinsic to him. The first does not decide to be cunning, he is a player, unlike the second who plays only to win. The desire to show ruse is the opposite of ruse: the desire is too full of sincerity, it lacks distance. One wants to show who one is "really", whereas the free spirit does not know the need for "really": he is fully in his joy of thinking, playing, existing. In this sense, the finesse of mind comes close to idiocy or madness, by its lack of respect for habit, convenience, and diverse logics, that is to say, it distorts reality to a certain extent, a freedom that runs against a fixed reality. Any convenience or determination is an obstacle to it. One of the etymologies proposed for the term ruse is "rursus", which in Latin means "upside down", in other words "in spite of common sense".

---

### Paradox

Ruse cannot be proud, it must forget itself to be all to itself, all to its ruse. Without detachment, ruse ceases to be cunning. Of course the cunning person must know his own schemes and weaknesses, as well as those of others, which implies knowledge, control and calculation. It is, however, calculation and the absence of calculation. It is present much, but it must take distance from the immediate: it must be light, in order to be flexible and unpredictable. Therein lies its paradox, its dialectical dimension: at the same time concern and carelessness, holding and being detached. Echoing this, Socrates doubts that ruse can be qualified as lying, precisely because it has an important dimension of truth, already in the relationship of the cunning person to himself, who must be aware of reality in order to act adequately. Now lying to oneself is the only

true lie that must be denounced. On the relation to reality, there is a detail that deserves a detour in this story: the role of the wall, to which the reader pays little attention. A wall symbolizes at the same time solidity, rigidity, predictability, that is to say the exact opposite of cunning. It is this wall that serves as a support for the narrative. As this wall is apparently wobbly, one must stick to it, that is to say, become a wall itself, so to speak, to freeze oneself. In this way, the visitor finds himself "attached" to the wall of his own free will, which should have given him something to think about. He suffers, he cannot move, he has lost all freedom, only because he wants to measure himself against Nasruddin. The image of the wall captures here the rigidity generated by the pretension and boasting, even the stupidity of man. He remains stuck, he will only be freed by laughter and shame, that is to say by the awareness of his ridicule. Nasruddin is there, leaning against a wall. We imagine him happy, contemplative and lazy while the other men of the village are working in the fields. He takes things as they happen, he listens to what he comes across and he plays with everything that comes to him. Without even knowing it, without even knowing him, he was waiting for this stranger, he was ready for him. By inviting him to support the wall that risks collapsing, without even thinking, Nasruddin invites the other to put himself in the same posture: take what comes and play, rather than claiming any status. "Stay there" enjoins Nasruddin to the foreigner who wants to prove himself, "Stop trying to measure yourself, stop trying to compare yourself. Do and live with what surrounds you, instead of being obsessed with yourself. Pay attention to what is outside of you, that's what will make you exist in a less artificial way." He invites the visitor to contemplate his own chimeras, through the awareness that later comes from the workers, those simple and hard-working men who embody the principle of reality. It is a question of interacting with what is present, with what happens, rather than setting illusory objectives and becoming the game of one's own illusions. Without this asceticism, constrained to a reduced finality, the trick limits itself, it signs its own defeat. True cunning implies a certain lightness, freedom, openness and presence in the world. Too attached to its object, it loses its strength and efficiency, the game becomes locked, it lacks play. It is therefore a question of freeing the ruse from any finality so that it may experience all its power and joy.

 Questions to deepen and prolong
**Comprehension**

- Why does the foreigner want to compete with Nasruddin?
- Why was Nasruddin leaning against the wall?
- What does the wall symbolize in this story?
- Why does Nasruddin not say who he is?
- Why does the stranger not understand that he is being fooled?
- How do the workers guess that the stranger has already met Nasruddin?
- What do the workers represent in this story?
- Why is Nasruddin not one of the workers?
- Why do the workers insult the foreigner?
- What is the difference between these two cunning men?

**Reflection**

- \* Why are we crafty?
- \* Is ruse a recommendable attitude?
- \* Do you have to be brave to be cunning?
- \* Is cunning a form of cheating?
- \* Why do we like to play tricks on others?
- \* Why do we not like to be fooled?
- \* Why do we make fun of those who are fooled by others?
- \* Should we beware of others?
- \* Is work a moral obligation?
- \* Why is it common to overestimate oneself?



## Chapter 8 The Turkey

### Speech and thinking

While walking through the market, Nasruddin saw a man selling a parrot. He was speaking loudly and praising his bird, for its colorful and shimmering plumage and for its exceptional gifts as an imitator of the human voice. A crowd of curious people was surrounding him, admiring the bird, talking to him to hear him repeat the words, but because of its high price, no one would buy it yet.

Nasruddin immediately went home and returned to the market. He set up a stall not far from the parrot seller and placed a large, black turkey with a huge red frill under its beak on it. He demanded an even higher price than for the parrot. People were surprised at the incredible price he was asking for it.

- Why would someone buy your turkey, when you can get twenty for the same price?
- Have you seen the price at which this man is selling his parrot?
- Maybe, but that bird knows how to talk, said someone else.
- My turkey does much better.
- What does he do that is so extraordinary?
- Look at him! Well, he does think!

### Thinking

Thinking is a term that refers to an activity of an indeterminate nature. Its most ambiguous aspect lies in the opposition between an indeterminate, chaotic internal movement, without control or even consciousness, but which can always be called "thinking", and a deliberate, focused, efficient and productive process. Thus, as synonyms of thinking, we encounter the terms to reflect, calculate, dream, contemplate, believe, judge, want, consent, conclude, imagine, predict, etc. These are all meanings that present great differences. Of course, all these verbs have a common connotation: they refer to a psychic activity, which takes place in the mind, or in the brain, as the materialists prefer to say, which a priori is not immediately visible, unless it manifests itself through complementary activities, in particular the use of words. Unless, again, they see it as the materiality of a simple neuronal agitation.

It is this first problem that the Nasruddinian turkey joke addresses. Indeed, he claims that his turkey thinks: what right could we have to doubt

it? If we take the verb to think in the most undifferentiated sense, we can probably defend the idea that the turkey thinks. After all, it recognizes a food that is edible from a food that is not, it distinguishes its own from other animals, it can remember a person or a place, etc. So the Hodja's claim remains unquestionable. It remains to be seen whether the argument becomes valid, since a perfectly acceptable assertion may constitute an unacceptable argument, for example if it is irrelevant. But if, in the absolute sense, one can accept the idea that this turkey thinks, does this justify the excessive value that Nasruddin gives it? Probably not, since there is nothing extraordinary about "thinking" as defined in this way: it can be found in any turkey and in many other animals. In fact, to make a joke, the turkey, with its somewhat ridiculous appearance and its not very harmonious gurgling, remains in many cultures the symbol of imbecility or lack of reflection.

One can conclude from this idea that Nasruddin ironically criticizes his fellow citizens for their lack of thought. They pretend to think but do not think, or at least they think that they think but they think indiscriminately, using this verb in an undifferentiated or reductionist way. In other words, they are devoid of judgment, that superior faculty of thinking that allows us to discriminate, according to Kant for example. Nevertheless, one wonders why Nasruddin would ironize with his close ones. One can find a first reason for this explanation: stupidity is an eminently observable phenomenon in human behavior, and most of Nasruddin's stories touch on this characteristic. Of course he thinks more than the animals, but as Descartes underlines, it is "not enough to be endowed with common sense, it is still necessary to know how to apply it", even if according to him our capacity to conceive infinitely exceeds our faculty to imagine. Thus the human being would be below the capacities which are his. It is probably precisely this discrepancy that strikes us in our fellow human beings that Nasruddin portrays in such an entertaining way.

---

### Shimmering

A second explanation of the Nasruddinian irony, more specific, touches on the very content of the story. We are told of a crowd fascinated by the presence of a parrot. But what can characterize this animal? No more than the turkey the parrot is a symbol of intelligence. To call someone a "parrot" is to accuse him of repeating words without understanding them, by a pure act of memory, a memory that nevertheless refers to one of the meanings of the term "thinking": remembering. But if he looks intelligent, if he remembers a lot of things, if he uses rare and complicated words, the "parrot" impresses everyone. This idea is a recurring theme in the Nasruddinian repertoire, as the phenomenon is

common in everyday life. For example, in teaching, according to the teachers, "psittacism" is a real problem. Perhaps it is already a problem for the teachers themselves. In any case, we are fascinated by the word: as long as it is eloquent, as it flatters us with its form or content. Of course rhetoric is an art, which pleases and convinces, but it is also a manipulation, which is based on the absence of critical judgment. This is what we can call the shimmering of the word. Let us add that what also attracts shoppers around the parrot, its visual shimmering, is its "multicolored and shimmering plumage", that is to say an easy and complacent aesthetic, devoid of any subtlety, sparkling with rhinestones and glitter, which attracts and holds the gaze of all, even the brute or the child. Let's assume that this bird symbolizes mainly appearance, the superficial dimension that produces an effect on the senses. We can here oppose the turkey's lackluster appearance to the parrot's shimmering, just as we can oppose the asceticism of thought, generally unattractive and popular, to the shimmering of rhetoric. The turkey thinks. Its black plumage and ridiculous ruff, its somewhat repulsive appearance, its sad ramage which gives it an unhappy, pensive or outdated look, suit Epinal's image of a reclusive and out-of-phase thinker. Just by looking at him, one can indeed believe that he is thinking: he looks ridiculous enough for that. As for the parrot's admirers, they look just as ridiculous for other reasons. As often in Nasruddin's stories, they are as bad as each other.

---

### Thinking too much

Another interpretation of this story is provided by the Russian proverb: "The turkey thought too much, he ended up in the soup." For there is something strange about this "thinking turkey". In order to know that he is thinking, one must trust Nasruddin's word, a word that is unreliable since he loves to utter inanities. This is what happens to many people who think: they tell us that they think, but we hardly see the manifestation of it. "I am thinking", they say, when asked why they take so long to answer a question. Of course, they may feel like they are thinking, and there is something going on in their minds that they seem to have some difficulty or some complacency. But one cannot rigorously call this "thinking", as thinking is supposed to be operative. Something has to show the result, this activity has to manifest itself in a certain way. The simple fact of saying or doing nothing, of standing still, is not sufficient proof of an act of thinking, as is often heard. It is rather the act of "bethinking", such as in the expression: "These events leave me pensive". That is to say, an inchoate, fuzzy, hesitant and indecisive thought, which expresses the perplexity and difficulty of thinking more than anything else. Trying to

think and having difficulty grasping ideas, when thinking resists vectorization and one has difficulty concentrating, is it still thinking? Certainly, one will say, and in a way one will be right. But then everyone thinks, and we think all the time, so the term doesn't mean much anymore. Some even think too much, they get lost in it, they become powerless. So Nasruddin is right: his turkey thinks, although it is not worth much.

 Questions to deepen and prolong
**Comprehension**

- What does the parrot represent in this story?
- Why are passers-by attracted by the parrot?
- Why would one buy such a parrot?
- Why is the crowd surprised by the turkey, and not by the parrot?
- Why does Nasruddin try to sell his turkey at an outrageous price?
- How do we know that Nasruddin's turkey "thinks"?
- Does Nasruddin's turkey think?
- What is the difference between a turkey and a parrot?
- Does Nasruddin think he can sell his turkey?
- What does Nasruddin want to show with his turkey?

**Reflection**

- \* Why is imitation attractive?
- \* Is the human being generally superficial?
- \* Is overkill a good communication strategy?
- \* Can we say something without thinking it?
- \* Are there different ways of thinking?
- \* Do animals think?
- \* Can we not think?
- \* Can we think without language?
- \* What can stop us from thinking?
- \* Why is speech fascinating to us?

### Rhetoric and confusion

Nasruddin Hodja enters a clothing store to buy a new chalvar. After having tried several of them, he fixes his choice on one of them, blue and black, which suits him wonderfully, he judges. When the time comes to pay, he pretends to change his mind and announces to the merchant:

– Finally, I'll take this yellow djubbe instead.

Nasruddin puts on the garment, which he likes just as much. Then he heads for the exit.

– Hey! Where are you going like that? Shouts the merchant. What kind of man are you, to take the merchandise and leave without paying for it?

Nasruddin turns around and replies:

– And you, what kind of man are you to speak to me like that and accuse me without reason? Didn't I just give you back the chalvar, which costs exactly the same?

– Come on! You didn't pay for the chalvar either, as far as I know!

– Ah! Son of a dog! You swindler! You want to make me pay for a product that I don't buy? You'll see, I'm immediately going to file a complaint with the cadi!

### Bad faith

Of course, Nasruddin's strategy is coarse and no merchant would be caught in it. But as always in this caricatural form, it leads us to think about ourself and the functioning of society. What is at stake in this absurd comedy? Above all, it is a problem of ownership, a desire for possession and the competition it engenders. A merchant offers objects to get money, as much as possible, while the customer wants these objects without giving money, or as little as possible. From the first glance, a commercial relationship of this type, between seller and buyer, is a kind of conflict of interest, unless for one of the two the possession of goods or money is superfluous or without interest, which is rather an exception. This "opposition" can be lived without a hitch, insofar as both parties do not abuse their prerogatives, if they remain moderate in their demands, if a minimum feeling of rightness animates them. But this is not always the case, insofar as feelings of desire and possession easily fall into excess: nothing guarantees the measure of this, except the social dimension, with its principles of propriety. Only the law or rules, accompanied by their arsenal of sanctions,

ensure the relative good functioning of commercial exchanges. It would be enough, for example, if the law against theft no longer existed to witness pitched battles in the stores, as it is sometimes the case during large sales or riots.

The main characteristic of Nasruddin's behavior is bad faith. Bad faith refers to saying certain things that one knows to be untrue or committing certain bad or wrongful acts, while pretending that there is no problem. One may already consider that one is deceiving oneself, but bad faith refers mainly to the relationship with others: to duplicity, to the gap between conscience and speech. Nevertheless, by dint of bad faith, it is true that the subject can end up convincing himself. In fact, it can be said that bad faith is motivated by desire, whether it is a desire for power, appearance or manipulation. But this desire comes up against reality: it does everything to deny it, to modify its perception, to make others take bladders for lanterns.

When Nasruddin presents his arguments to the merchant, he believes what he says. If he simply wanted to steal the merchandise, he would find a more direct subterfuge, or use violence. He prefers to use rhetoric or manipulation to get what he wants, because at the same time he wants something else. It is in this simultaneity of desire that the issue or the ground of bad faith lies. One could say that this complementary desire is that of maintaining appearances: those of morality, of the judgment of others, of social identity, etc. Appearances must be saved, even though everyone would know pertinently that they are false, that is to say that they do not correspond to objective reality. It is necessary to be right, to impose a false reality, to obtain an agreement from others, *nolens volens*, to demand an act of recognition from them, by any means. Nowadays, the social, political or economic importance of communication refers precisely to this problem of bad faith. The question is no longer so much whether what we do is right or wrong, fair or not: we must know how to communicate, that is to say, how to persuade. More than one public man, rejected by general agreement, concluded that he had communicated badly, rather than wondering whether there was a problem with his project or his actions. We are witnessing a kind of professionalization of bad faith, since it is a question of fabricating or redefining reality.

---

### Justification

When Nasruddin exchanges the blue and black chalvar for the yellow djobbe, the exchange is indeed correct, since they are worth the same price, as he so rightly points out. The use of objective and indisputable elements is an integral part of the argumentative process of bad faith. This is called justification,

something between proof and excuse. When it comes to transforming reality or lying, there is one important rule: try to stick as closely as possible to reality. Unless we resort to the extreme strategy of overkill, which means that the bigger the lie, the more credible it is. As with bluffing, for it to work, the bet must be large and impressive. Thus Nasruddin insists on price equivalence to avoid the larger reality: he is robbing the poor merchant. One uses a reduced and indisputable truth, towards which one draws the conversation, rather than facing a more substantial and embarrassing reality.

To confuse his interlocutor, he uses another specific technique: tit-for-tat. Just as effective as it is banal, this technique consists of discrediting the opponent by mimicking his accusations and turning them back to him, or even by repeating exactly them. It is the "And you then!" that children and adults are so fond of. We don't respond to the other person's argument, we simply accuse them of not being a good person or of doing the same thing they accuse us of. Of course, this does not change the nature of the original accusation, but it serves to shut up the threatening interlocutor, forcing him, if possible, to defend himself.

The last technique used is emotional overload. Nasruddin becomes angry, indignant, and even threatens his opponent with legal action. This is a kind of blackmail that is widely practiced, especially in "negotiations" between couples. When one is short of arguments, one gets angry, one threatens, which has the function of impressing the other, frightening him, even making him doubt. Once again, as with a bluff in a card game, by showing the stakes, one makes one's opponent lose his confidence, who is no longer so sure of his right or of his assets. Or he becomes afraid of the possible consequences and hesitates to take risks whose consequences frighten him, because they are too clear or because they are no longer very clear. Indignation works well: it is a strong emotion that graces itself with morality and virtue, since it is a feeling of anger or revolt against evil or injustice. The speaker presents himself as a victim and accuses his opponent of being immoral and shameless.

It is hardly bad faith without a minimum of conscience, but the weight of the latter is unbearable, so one tries to dilute it, disguise it, or even eliminate it, which is impossible. Bad faith consists in pretending not to know, when one knows very well. One plays a game, one provokes the other, which can then be reduced to bad faith. In this sense bad faith is contagious, hence the dialogue of the deaf people.

The interlocutor is upset because he feels weakened or threatened, because he suspects the other person of being angry with him, of wanting to hurt him. Worried, he thinks that his real arguments will not be sufficient, they will



be confused or will not be validated. Bad faith in the conflict is worrisome to others because they try to blame it on them. In addition, trust is shaken by lies and absurdity. Whether it is trust in others, in oneself or in reason. Moreover, the various operations of diversion of dialogue and reasoning, and the reversals of situations they imply, cause confusion, which is accompanied by frustration and a feeling of powerlessness.

In order to better believe what he says and knows to be fake, the speaker must put himself in the shoes of his own role. This is where excess or emotional outburst proves useful. To adhere to his own lie, the man of bad faith, like the drug addict or gambler, needs to increase the dose. Unfortunately, the more he plays his role, the more he is disillusioned once the scene is over, when he finds himself alone, abandoned by his listeners. He no longer finds this same motivation, this need to convince. He fails in himself, facing the sadness of reality. The waiter gets tired of being a waiter, the father of a family to be a father of a family, the French citizen to be a French citizen.

In one form or another, we all practice bad faith. Thus, anyone who claims to explain an unfortunate gesture by outburst, inattention or anger, is speaking under the guise of bad faith. For he ascribes a kind of "external" cause to what in fact emanates from himself. It would be like a thief who would accuse his hand of being both the origin and the sole cause of a theft, or who would accuse the owner of the property he has stolen of having provoked it by his exhibitionism. It is the banal confusion between the efficient cause and the formal or final cause, between condition and origin, that makes us speak this way.

The concept of bad faith is very important to Jean-Paul Sartre, who considers it a very powerful existential dynamic. It is principally a kind of resort to escape from existential anguish. But at the same time, it is an escape from our freedom. He explains that we take our situation in the world, our contingency, and we play this arbitrary reality as if it were really our being: we play the doctor, the father of a family, the French citizen. Our conscience has no foundation or anchoring, it is free. But we do not wish to take it upon ourselves: it is too disturbing. We try to believe in what we do, in what happens to us, by attributing an ontological value to this situation. "It's me", "It's my nature", "It's my character", which is the worst of all a posteriori justifications, bad faith par excellence. Since it is a survival drive, it is not surprising to encounter it so often, in various, often excessive, forms.

## Confusion

Confusion is an important aspect of bad faith. It protects reality from being challenged. It is an effective strategy for reducing others. This is what Nasruddin does to the poor merchant. Among other things, it reverses roles. The thief becomes the accuser: the victim is threatened with prosecution for theft and assault. But when one faces the confusion of discourse, a problem always arises: is the confusion unconscious and involuntary, or conscious and deliberate? The present story may lead us to think that this is a maneuver of Nasruddin, and we often meet people who use such schemes to get what they want or to get out of a difficult situation, to escape an accusation or responsibility. By creating a cloud of words and ideas, like an octopus projecting its ink, the speaker tries to escape the judgment of others. Either because he makes it impossible to provide a sensible argument, thus silencing the speaker and turning him into an impotent interlocutor. Or because he succeeds in getting the speaker to accept senseless reasoning by a sleight of hand, of which rhetoric is very fond, since it makes it its substance. The principle transgressed by such processes devoid of coherence— illogisms or paralogisms— is the one that establishes that any exchange or communication between beings necessarily conforms to reason or common sense, a condition for a mutual understanding and a sensible exchange, a shared quest for truth.

Nevertheless, when one wants to know whether this confusion is conscious or deliberate, one realizes that it is not easy to make such a judgment. Indeed, the person who creates such chaos— by seeking to defend himself or to obtain something— engages so much in his discourse, psychologically and cognitively, that he ends up adhering to it by losing himself in it. It is a bit like the principle of the liar, who, in order to better convince others of his words, ends up believing his own lies, and no longer distinguishes them from the truth. This is to say that the distinction between consciousness and unconsciousness is not clear-cut, but rather one must postulate a gradation by degree between these two extremes. Knowing that it remains very difficult to produce a confused discourse without getting caught up in it, just as it is difficult to mentally disentangle oneself from the confused discourse we hear. We can even conclude that confusion remains more powerful than reason, because certain "reasoning" makes us doubt our own capacity for reason, a painful feeling if there is one. The role of confusion in argumentation is to engender a loss of confidence in reason in others, to make them lose the reference points of rationality. In this sense, not only can one no longer trust one's own capacity for common sense, but one also doubts the capacity of others, thus annihilating any possibility of meaningful dialogue. One thus doubts one's relationship with others. In a

sense, this produces the same effect as a threat or insult: no more meaningful exchange is possible.

One may also wonder about the origin of the confusion: does it come from the speaker or the receiver, from one person or both? In Plato's *Meno*, the eponymous character of the title accuses Socrates of trying to confuse others. But if we look at what Socrates does through his questioning practice, he asks his interlocutor to clarify what he is saying. Either because the latter is not clear, or because he contradicts himself, explicitly or implicitly. Confronted with the demand of the "horsefly" or "torpedo fish", as he is called on several occasions, the interlocutor is flabbergasted, or hypnotized: he loses his means, as if the seat he was sitting on was suddenly taken away from him. Certainly the efficient cause of the disorder is indeed Socratic questioning, but its formal or material cause, the condition of the disorder, is the confusion that reigns beforehand in the person's mind. In this sense, the questioning is not the cause of the confusion, it is only the revealing one. And when *Meno*, like many others, accuses Socrates of confusing his mind, and moreover of doing so intentionally, the accusation is inaccurate.

 Questions to deepen and prolong

### Comprehension

- What do the clothes represent in this story?
- Does Nasruddin think the merchant will believe him?
- Are the questions of the merchant real questions?
- What defense strategy does Nasruddin choose in response to the merchant's accusations?
- Will Nasruddin really go to press charges?
- Why does Nasruddin insult the merchant?
- Does the merchant understand what is going on?
- Is Nasruddin serious in this story?
- What do these two characters have in common?
- What is Nasruddin trying to do in this story?

### Reflection

- \* Is it better to believe what you say in order to lie?
- \* Is bad faith calculated or instinctive?
- \* What is the function of bad faith?
- \* Is the human being essentially dishonest?
- \* Is man a wolf to man?
- \* Why do we insult others?
- \* Is rhetorical argumentation natural?
- \* Is concern for appearance a factor in corruption?
- \* Why are we often confused?
- \* Why do we seek to justify ourself?

## Chapter 10 The Bedouin

### Trust and blindness

A Bedouin came to see Nasruddin. He was furious:

- I was in the desert when I felt tired. I entrusted my camel to God and took a nap under the palm trees. When I woke up, I couldn't find my mount.
- And why are you telling me this?
- Because you told us at the mosque to have faith in God.
- Of course, my friend, of course; have faith in God, but never forget to tie up your camel!

### Fatalism

There is an important issue in our existence, both in terms of attitudes and action, which is the opposition between "trust and will". It could be articulated through other antinomies, such as "passive and active", "contemplative and dynamic", "quiet and worried", or "fatalism and voluntarism" depending on the aspect we wish to emphasize. Let us choose to analyze this last pair of concepts for the moment, starting with fatalism. Fatality and the philosophical attitude that accompanies it may seem somewhat outdated to the contemporary reader, at a time when the concept of free will, freedom and willpower is much more fashionable, at the risk of omnipotence. Even aging and death, while remaining unavoidable limits, are pushed back or some claim they are pushed back by the advances of science and technology. Everything related to fate seems to us to be from another age. If we can still accept the idea of destiny in its positive aspects, fatality seems to us a form of admission of impotence, a kind of psychological or existential defeat. Therefore, one generally defends oneself from being fatalistic.

However, one can find a certain interest in fatalism, even a form of wisdom. Let us try for a moment to make an apology for it. First of all, fatalism is restful, it offers the soul a certain tranquility, as opposed to the very fashionable "stress", a trend linked precisely to the desire for omnipotence. It represents an acceptance of the order of the world, whether good or bad, because we cannot know what is at stake: our judgment is necessarily based on limited evidence, from which we nevertheless produce cognitive or moral judgments. Fatalism invites us to somehow escape from morality or from any certainty, simply because we do not have the means to implement a free judgment worthy

of the name, which implies a certain humility. Of course, this does not prevent us from acting according to our judgments, however limited they may be, considering they reveal our destiny and its consequences.

Fatalism simplifies our existence, since it is a matter of trusting reality without asking oneself too many questions. Everything that happens is part of the order of things, and therefore can only be good and right, in its cause and effects. If there is evil, it is only an indispensable condition for doing right, just as mountains need valleys. It is comforting, since our miserable existence is taken on by infinitely superior instances, of whatever form or origin, and it guarantees us supreme justice. We live in the best of all possible worlds, where there is nothing to complain about, not even great misery, an attitude that can be observed in certain regions or cultures of the world: all things simply have their reason for being. And finally, the unfathomable or impenetrable aspect of transcendence, nature, divinity or whatever, invites us not to exhaust oneself in vain and futile intellectual ratiocinations. Fatalism can be criticized as a sad or pessimistic attitude, since things are somehow played out beforehand. But one can also find a certain joy: that of living in a world where everything is for the best, everything has a reason to exist and for this reason each event is part of a kind of pre-established harmony, as Leibniz conceived it.

Of course, any deterministic vision, by the fact that it defends the conviction that we are not free to choose what we are or what we do, what the world is and what happens in it, since these things are determined by the context or unchangeable processes, can incite a certain passivity. Such an attitude will be criticized as cowardly, irresponsible or lazy, since such a person no longer has to worry about doing anything, adopting the easy way out.

---

### Voluntarism

On the contrary, voluntarism is an attitude which consists of thinking that our will can and must determine our actions, and in a certain way also determine the course of events. It is therefore opposed to fatalism or determinism, in the sense that our intervention affects the course of contingent, determines the future. But it also opposes, to a lesser extent, a speculative or intellectual position that may not lead to any decision or action. “The will” generally designates the faculty of exercising a free choice, in principle determined by reason, or blended with a certain subjectivity. This requirement implies having recourse to reasonings, general principles, established values, moral, existential or other, etc., in order to make a choice. In this respect, will is distinguished from desire, which is impulsive and devoid of foundation, and from instinct, which is spontaneous, based on need and does not deliberate.

For many philosophers, the will is what best represents the capacity for freedom that the human being is endowed with. At the same time because he is determined neither by the order of the world, nor by his own nature, nor by the jolts of his mind. Although some criticize the illusion represented by the idea of establishing reason as the sole guarantee of this freedom: love or faith would be for some the form of freedom par excellence. One could defend against this a more general or minimalist idea of free will, which consists in defining it as an action determined by the individual without any obligation or external constraint. These different visions of the concept generate certain dilemmas, such as whether morality, law or social relations can be combined with the concept of free will or whether they constitute obstacles to its implementation.

Will consists of several elements. First an intention, that is to say a goal, the mental representation of a virtual or ideal reality, which must be realized. Secondly, a context, with its obstacles, considerations without which the will is phantasmatic: one can indeed want something impossible, like the very common illusion of perfection. Thirdly, the reality of the will also implies knowing the consequences of its realization, be they practical, moral or whatever. Fourth, as we see in the expression "having will", tenacity is a necessary component. Without this continuity of will, it is only a fragile and ephemeral desire. Of course, these elements are to be taken into consideration in a conception of will determined by reason, following deliberation. We can therefore see that the voluntarist person is simultaneously endowed with rational, psychological and moral capacities.

The criticism that can be made of such a scheme is its audacity, presumption or stubbornness. Indeed, such a person thinks that he is both capable of determining what must be done, submitting the world to his decisions, and relentlessly pursuing his goals without constantly worrying about others. One observes in such an individual a concern for control, which he deploys in order to ensure that everyone corresponds to his desires, that everything bends to his expectations. He finds it difficult to put up with the failure of his project, and he has difficulty in questioning the legitimacy of it. His reasons always seem to him like reason. He is wary of those "others" who are not animated by the same will as him, either because they are opposed to him or because they are not endowed with the same obstinacy.

---

### Expectation

It is this problem, a tension between fatalism and voluntarism, that is addressed in the present story. On the one hand the Bedouin, who trusts either Nasruddin or God. Both represent for him figures of authority, in other words,

those who "can" or those who "know", those on whom we rely since they hold power, even omnipotence. But as is often the case, beneath a facade of fatalism lies an intention, that is to say, a will that demands to be satisfied and therefore a potential disappointment. Here we find the lie of many acts of faith or visions of the world: we do not mind adhering to them, but they must also suit our expectations. The Bedouin does not mind trusting the Imam and God, but only if both satisfy his wishes. If he were a complete fatalist, he would have accepted the disappearance of his camel as part of the divine plan or order of things: he would submit to the course of events. But this is not the case, he complains about the harsh reality: things do not happen the way he would like them to. He ignores the fact that providence does not provide what one wants but what is right and good. It is this truth that it is necessary not to give up. This is how our faith is put to the test. The Bedouin must understand that if his camel has escaped, it is because he did not tie it up, without it affecting his trust in Nasruddin and in God. He must not be angry with anyone but himself. He must not use others to hide his own stupidity. For he has taken Nasruddin's words in a primitive and lazy way: there lies his first mistake, in himself.

Nasruddin's role is more complex. He is at the same time the one who proclaims the order of the world, but who must also account for contingency. Of course, you have to trust in God, but that does not relieve you of your responsibilities. This is a paradox that is difficult to grasp and has been the subject of philosophers and theologians for centuries. How can we give an account of human freedom within the framework of divine omnipotence? One can understand the reaction of the Bedouin, who has the impression that he has been cheated, since his trust is not rewarded. But he makes two mistakes, customary of trust. The first is to think that trust means that one gets everything one expects. This would be a very comfortable attitude, much more popular than it actually is. True trust is granted despite "results", despite expectations and disappointments, because it makes sense in a context of uncertainty and surprises. The second mistake is to think that trust implies taking responsibility away from oneself, as if it should be blind and powerless.

---

## Trust

Trust implies accepting what the "other" says, what the other does, whoever the other is. In contrast to mistrust, where the subject trusts only himself: he is afraid of the "other". Trust implies a letting go, an acceptance of the "other" for what he is, as he is. This means that, in the absolute, there is no need, for example, to verify what the "other" says. In a way, trust is a way



to move forward. When one has confidence in someone, one is in consent, one can act. When one is mistrustful, one can do nothing, one is paralyzed. To be confident is to not give up. On the contrary, it is opening up to the other, it is surpassing oneself, it is fighting with the other, and not against the other.

God is not a human being, he is not there to provide for the needs of a particular person, and he is certainly not there to provide what is asked of him. If God is love, he is agape of no one or nothing in particular, who loves everyone in the same way, without preference. It is a love that desires nothing, that has no object, that loves without expecting anything. Trusting in God is not expecting God to do something for us, it is believing in something that is beyond us, it is adhering to a principle that is infinitely beyond us in perfection. It is not a question, like the Bedouin, of confusing "trusting in" and "expecting something from". This is how Nasruddin mocks the Bedouin, criticizes his reductionist logic and brings him back to a principle of reality.

"Help yourself and heaven will help you", the saying goes. If there is an almightiness, one must postulate on the one hand that it is not always understandable, but on the other hand that it is just, since this God is supposed to be perfect. So there is no reason why he should reward human weaknesses such as laziness or distraction. God wants us to be free and responsible. So we cannot be cheated by God, but only by ourself. Believing in God does not imply that God will do everything for humans, but to know that there is an order of the world, a justice, a benevolence. God does not concern himself with details, it seems. In this perspective, his omnipotence and omniscience do not incite him to master contingency, but to ensure general principles regulating the being. Of course, in various religious traditions, we encounter Gods who intervene on an ad hoc basis, according to need. But these needs must still be of great legitimacy. Thus, in a way, for our reason, an almighty God does not exist. Such a God would leave no room for humans or any other creature. He would allow no temporality, his eternity would absorb any sequential difference, it is unthinkable for us. It is therefore difficult for us to trust unconditionally, although this is the very condition of trust.

 Questions to deepen and prolong
**Comprehension**

- Is the Bedouin calculating?
- Is the Bedouin lazy?
- Is the Bedouin right to be angry with Nasruddin?
- Why did the Bedouin believe Nasruddin?
- Who is the Bedouin really angry at?
- Why does Nasruddin criticize the Bedouin?
- Is Nasruddin acting out of bad faith in this story?
- Do Nasruddin and the Bedouin have a different view of faith in God?
- Did the Bedouin understand Nasruddin's initial preaching?
- Is the Bedouin a victim?

**Reflection**

- \* Does trust need evidence?
- \* Can reason be free of beliefs?
- \* Can we think of an almighty God?
- \* Is fatalism a form of wisdom?
- \* Is voluntarism contrary to faith?
- \* Should we rely first and foremost on ourselves?
- \* Is doubt always healthy?
- \* Do phenomena always have a reason to exist?
- \* Should we trust others?
- \* Are we responsible for ourselves?

## Chapter 11 Dialogue of the Deaf

### Listening and subjectivity

Nasruddin was sitting quietly in front of his house when his landlord came to him.

- Peace be upon you, Nasruddin! And may this day be favorable to you!
- Precisely, I was thinking about it and I can assure you that you will have your money as soon as tomorrow!

When Nasruddin went back inside his house, his wife, always curious, asked to whom he was talking.

- The landlord wants me to pay him rent. But I don't have a penny in my pocket!

His wife answered:

- It doesn't matter, you know. I just need this new caftan only for the wedding in three weeks.

Once Nasruddin was out, his daughter asked her mother about the news:

- What were you talking about with daddy?
- Your father asked me when I needed the tailor's money for my new caftan. I told him it was in three weeks, for the wedding.
- You know, I'm sure Omar will propose marriage to me. I love him so much.

Nasruddin came back, saw his daughter smiling, and asked her why she looked so happy.

- Mother was telling me about my future wedding, we're going to have a big party, and a wonderful banquet!
- I too am starting to get really hungry. I hope the lunch will be served promptly.

### Speech

The word *parole* is the French equivalent of “speech” in English, where the meaning has been kept in a reduced way, either to qualify something expressed orally or to designate a sort of promise by a prisoner. It is frequently used as well to designate “speech” in other Romance languages: *palabra* (Spanish/, *parola* (italian/, from *parabola* (Latin/. This term has the same Greek origin as that of “parable”, which originally means comparison, illustration, connection. So just as the “parable” is an allegorical mode of expression in literature, or “parabola” is a curve in geometry, speech is considered in essence allusive

and indirect. Plato even qualifies words as “leaky pots” to express their elusive nature. The speech is not the thing, it is not the order of the world, it is an attempt, an approximation: it tries to tell the world without ever really managing to do so because it cannot be the world, but only one way to mention it. Although sometimes it deludes itself and pretends to be reality, to replace reality, or to generate reality. The word is however different from the simple animal sound, generally perceived in an intuitive and direct way, which is more “objective”. Because language is coded, its forms are arbitrary and conventional, culturally and historically determined: in this sense it is necessarily a translation, an allusion, a betrayal.

In order to fulfill its function, language takes two main forms: description and explanation, in Greek *mythos* and *logos*. Indeed, *mythos*, the description of things, beings, phenomena, is mythological, since it tells a story that can never match objective reality. It is always a bias, a sham, a subterfuge. Neither materiality, nor chronology, nor place, nor forms correspond. However, nothing prohibits, just like in a pictorial representation, to stick with the best of our abilities to the reality that we perceive or believe to perceive. On the other hand, *logos*, the explanation or analysis, tries to explain, either because it cannot describe, or because it wishes to understand, or to make people understand what is happening. The term *logos* means speech as well as reason. Which can mean both that speech is the tool of thinking, or that thinking is the very substance of speech. Thus the human being, because he is gifted with speech, is gifted with reason. Whether this speech has a communicative aim for the outside or is developed in a dialogue with oneself, be it oral or written, it is intimately connected to reason.

We speak for many reasons, not simply to describe or understand the world. Speech can also have a practical or performative purpose, in order to ask or offer something, whether that something is material, ideal or sentimental. One can ask for an object or make a declaration of love. It can be a desire for expression, by simple need to exist or to live better. For example, by expressing sorrow, by sharing joy, by praising one’s own qualities or that of a person we care about, with whom we identify. Because of the subtlety of its articulations, speech can easily fit closely to the nuances of thought and subjectivity. It is thus easily subjected to the specificity of the speaker, be it individual or collective. But at the same time, this subject is determined by its own structures, whether his own or those of the culture he is sharing with others. Just like thinking, the speech is a prisoner of the language in which it is spoken: it cannot claim any neutrality, any radical freedom. Although freedom of speech may lead one to believe in the omnipotence of the word,

which is a very current phenomenon, it only can operate within a very tight code. As rich as language is, it determines a way of thinking. And within this language, a given subject takes marked paths, used many times. This is true for structures as well as for content. Our expectations, fears, concerns and desires affect both our understanding of the world and of others, and the speech that emanates from our being, or from others. This is what happens in this story, where each one understands from the other what he is able to or what he wants to understand. The words from elsewhere are only a pretext for ours. Each of the characters presented lives in their own world: the word of the other is perceived in a vague and approximate manner, as a distant and indistinct echo which only awakens their own worries. It is not a dialogue of the deaf people but a dialogue of people with hearing difficulties.

---

### Communication

Formally at least, the characters in this story communicate with each other, which is the central theme of the narrative. The term communication comes from the Latin *communicare*, which means to exchange. It is indeed about exchanging information, meaning, feelings or whatever. This exchange can take place between specific people, in relation to a group or even in an indeterminate way, as for example when writing a book, intended for all those who want to read it. The means can be diverse, whether it is the more natural modes of speech and body movements, or various techniques such as writing, art or electronic media. Communication crosses space and time, especially nowadays where technical power greatly amplifies the possibilities of exchange. Nevertheless, certain ancestral pictorial representations, rupestral or parietal, reach us, whose becoming and sustainability would certainly have surprised their authors.

This example poses the problem of intention and consciousness in communication. Do we need to know that we are communicating in order to communicate? Do we need to know what we are communicating in order to communicate? Do we need to know to whom we communicate in order to communicate? Logically, communication requires a sender, a message, a medium and a receiver. But it seems that just as the receiver does not have to be aware of receiving the message, the sender does not have to be aware of sending it. We can send and receive information without even realizing it, for example we make automatic gestures, transmitted and perceived intuitively, as we sometimes realize in our surprising relationships with our fellow human beings. Others receive certain information from us of which we are unaware, and we receive information from others of which we are as well unaware, which

we sometimes realize later.

That being said, any act of communication requires some form of community of meaning, without which it would be artificial to talk about communication. In the same way, one can also think that without a shared consciousness of the act and its content, it might be pointless to talk about communication, since it implies a minimum of meaning and apperception to make the exchange effective. For communication to work, the message must be understood or at least the receiver must be significantly affected by it. An explicit return from the receiver would also be the best proof of this effectiveness.

Ideally, information must exist beforehand in the spirit of the sender, be it conceptual, factual, intuitive, imaginary or sentimental. A message is then sent, in a specific form: verbal, pictorial, gestural, sound or other. Finally, the receiver formally perceives the message and transposes it in understandable terms to himself or others. Of course, again from an efficiency point of view, the clearer and more understandable the message, the better the communication is realized. But this is not the case in our story where the exchanges take a strange turn, which is a classic Nasruddinian caricature of everyday life. Let us take a look at the classic barriers to communication.

The most common obstacles are information filtering or selective perception, information overload, emotional overload, language problems, cultural, identity and intellectual differences, as well as moral or social inhibitions. The difficulties in comprehension may be related to the nature of the vocabulary, too technical or abstract lexicon, ambiguous terms, or ignorance of the context of reference. On a more material level, it may be spatial or temporal distance, the absence or weakness of appropriate tools, or a lack of technical skills. Nevertheless, the most common interference is more in the psychological domain: the difference in attitudes, linked to personal issues or the discrepancy in cultural or ideological matrices.

Any communication is part of a determined and codified framework that must be respected in order for the message to be operative. Unless you want to challenge the interlocutor to provoke a break or an awareness of the codes in place. This is, for example, what is periodically encountered in certain artistic, philosophical or poetic forms.

---

## Solipsism

What generally constitutes solipsism: the attitude of a person who, in his expression, his creation, his vision of the world, privileges solitude or the isolation of his subjectivity. It can be considered as a kind of "autism". One's own consciousness remains the only or the main reality, other consciousnesses and the

outside world being only vague representations. Solipsism can be considered to affect everyone to varying degrees. It is, for that matter, the main obstacle to any action of communication. Let us examine from this point of view what can be an obstacle for exchange between individuals. An ineffective communication is one that does not correspond to the expectations of the sender. The message is delayed, distorted, interrupted or inaudible. To understand these difficulties, one must take into account the functioning of others and their relationship.

”Dialogue of the deaf” stages the most classical scheme of impossibility in communication. Everyone is caught up in their own patterns, the listener’s listening is determined by his concerns, fears and expectations. As a result, the word of the other is not taken in its entirety: the listener does not respect its integrity. We thus witness various phenomena of parasitism that lead to incomprehension. For example, when Nasruddin sees his landlord, he does not hear at all what he is saying, even though the message is obvious: it is a simple greeting. He is obsessed by his financial worries: the mere sight of the landlord reminds him of his apprehensions, no other outside information is accessible to him. His wife hears what is said, but only partially, selectively, and in an associative way. She does not hear Nasruddin’s reasoning and concern: she brings the problem of the lack of money closer only to her desire for clothes. Her daughter does this in an even more radical way, since she reacts only to the term ”marriage”. This associative mode is opposed to the constructive mode: the latter has a logical course, the first proceeds by an arbitrary, subjective type of liaison. This is also what Nasruddin does in the last exchange, in an even more caricatural way, since the marriage of his daughter simply reminds him that he is hungry, a reaction that could not be more primary.

In the end, one can wonder if it is necessary to understand each other in order to communicate. If one adheres to this story as an indicator of daily reality, one might think that it is not. Everyone is with himself rather than with others, each has his own agenda, his own internal dynamics, his own psychic hierarchy that animates him. The other becomes almost accessory: they act as extras. It is not interesting in itself. Of course he is an interlocutor, one seeks his presence, but in the absolute one could almost talk to oneself. It seems, moreover, that the presence of the other, which manifests itself through exchanges, is more important than the content itself. For the narration specifies that each person wonders what the other has said, but without a real concern for listening and understanding. Very often, when people talk to each other, the attentive observer can notice that it is an exchange of monologues rather than a real dialogue. In order to speak, we need the presence of the other, we

need him to be there, no matter how much he really listens to us, no more than we really listen to him. Actually, it is not certain that most of us really want to be understood, especially in promiscuous relationships, by those close to us. Otherwise, we would try to understand ourself, which is less than obvious. We probably prefer that our entourage surrounds us without trying to scrutinize us too closely. We often privilege relational and sentimental speech rather than attentive and critical speech: it is first and foremost a question of expressing ourself and feeling good, of being surrounded, of being accepted, of feeling understood, rather than understanding. The important thing is that the other is there, and in this simple presence is perhaps the living substance of the communication.



 Questions to deepen and prolong
**Comprehension**

- What is the relationship between what the landlord says and what Nasrudin responds?
- How can the discrepancy between these two characters be explained?
- What is the relationship between what Nasruddin says and what his wife answers?
- How can the discrepancy between these two characters be explained?
- What is the relationship between what the mother says and what the daughter replies?
- How can the discrepancy between these two characters be explained?
- What is the relationship between what the daughter says and what Nasrudin answers?
- How can the discrepancy between these two characters be explained?
- What is common to all of these characters?
- What is the moral of this story?

**Reflection**

- \* Is the human being "autistic"?
- \* Why do we find it difficult to hear others?
- \* Is subjectivity more powerful than reason?
- \* What mainly motivates our actions?
- \* What mainly motivates our words?
- \* Are human beings instruments for each other?
- \* Is money the main concern of human beings?
- \* Why do we like to talk so much?
- \* Is speech a pleasure or a necessity?
- \* Is it necessary to understand oneself in order to understand others?

## Chapter 12 The Turban

### Appearance and identity

One morning a man enters Nasruddin's house in a hurry, without even knocking, holding a letter in his hand.

– Hodja, I need you. I just received this letter written in Persian, I need you to translate it for me right away.

– In Persian! exclaimed Nasruddin. But, my poor friend, I do not know a single word of that language!

– What do you mean! replied the intruder, visibly scandalized. We give you the title of master everywhere, you dare to wear a turban as big as a dome, and you don't even know Persian!

At these words, Nasruddin tears off his turban and presses it on the head of his interlocutor.

– Here you are, he shouts, here's the turban! Read your letter yourself, idiot!

### Scandal

The visitor is disconcerted by the "ignorance" of the Master, so he is scandalized. "Woe to him through whom the scandal comes", proclaim the Gospels. The word scandal comes from the Greek skandalon, which means "pebble", that is to say the stumbling block, the one that causes stumbling. Scandal is therefore that which deviates from the straight path, that which diverts from the good, that which makes a break with morality. Over time, scandal has also become the reaction to what is not in conformity with custom, to what contradicts the standards, in particular the moral or the sacred. The term thus covers a double phenomenon: the gesture or word that makes a rupture with the "good" or the "rule", and the reaction to this rupture.

Thus scandal also means a strong, virulent and emotional reaction. The moral sense of the scandalized person is exacerbated, it is strongly stimulated and revived by the events it condemns. Paradoxically, the "scandalized" person, while feeling disgust or hatred, at the same time experiences a certain pleasure: that of being on the right side; he savors the intense pleasure of a good conscience. In this outburst we encounter a kind of moral catharsis, as if by being scandalized we purify ourselves: we strongly exacerbate our own moral value by proclaiming it. This explains why one finds a certain pleasure in scandalizing oneself, as is periodically observed in some people. Thus the

visitor, himself ignorant of Persian, is no better than to be scandalized when he discovers that a master is ignorant of Persian just as much. He is almost relieved of the master's ignorance, which relieves him of his own. By discovering the lack of value of the master, he revalorizes himself.

The theme of scandal is dealt with on various occasions in the Gospels, where it is also stated: "it is impossible that a scandal does not happen". Furthermore, Jesus himself declares that he scandalizes and divides the public opinion. Thus, in this imperfect world, not only is it impossible not to be scandalized, but this is undoubtedly necessary. Nevertheless, the scandal is reversible: we scandalize each other, as is often the case in politics, for example, where it is an integral part of rhetorical strategies. In the present dialogue the scandal is overturned. At first the visitor is scandalized by Nasruddin's ignorance, as well as by the fact that he abuses his attributes and therefore social conventions: the turban has to be earned, it is the attribute of the masters, of the scholars. Then, in turn, Nasruddin is shocked at the manifest stupidity of this man, ignorant and coarse, that he even calls a fool. On the one hand, his hasty manners, demanding and violent, are harsh and vulgar; on the other hand his vision of society is very formal and superficial, and finally his idea of the master who should know everything is illusory and ingenuous.

One may be surprised that Nasruddin gets angry, a rare occurrence in the Nasruddinian corpus, since this wise man generally takes things with bonhomie, humor and placidity, even in certain situations where many others would get angry. Nevertheless, one will understand in this context the meaning of his anger: he is the mirror image of the person in front of him, as is often the case. He sends us back to ourself, often to excess, in a buffoonish way, a living caricature of our gestures and tendencies. In other words, he shows how he too can be scandalized, but not because of the lack of respect for social rules, but because of the obvious stupidity of this vulgar and presumptuous man. Indeed, from an objective point of view, the cause of the scandal is rather on the side of the intruder. This is often the case in wisdom stories, where we are shown a scandal that is not a scandal, to which a better founded scandal is opposed. Thus, the first scandal is a scandal, it is itself scandalous. This is what happens in the parable of the adulterous woman, where Jesus is scandalized by these men scandalized by the adulterous woman: he shows them their lack of legitimacy, their lack of generosity, a scandal that seems to him more serious than that of the adultery. Nasruddin offers another scandal, in order to show his interlocutor the absurdity of his behavior. For if the first scandal is that of ignorance and lack of respect for social rules, the second is the expression of reason that is rebelling against the indigence of what is

manifested.

## Indignation

Without doubt we need to add a few words on the concept of indignation, which seems to be addressed here. If anger often gets bad press among sages and philosophers, there is one form that seems to escape criticism: indignation. Anger is a good example of those bad passions that disturb the soul while expressing their powerlessness. It is pure reaction, lack of self-control: it seems to be the very antinomy of mental hygiene, the opposite of these "good" affects, which would be rather soft and thoughtful. But if anger is hateful and vulgar, indignation is not, because it is that emotion which expresses a deep attachment to justice, and therefore it is right, however violent it may be. It seems to represent reasonable or justified anger, because it is a revolt against the unacceptable. Therefore, it is better to declare oneself indignant than angry. When we are indignant, our emotion is legitimate. For example, we feel anger towards an abuser and compassion for a victim. In the present context, indignation is theoretically provoked by lies and pretension, since Nasruddin's turban "does not meet its commitments". But it is easy to realize in this story how the indignation displayed can be both false and ridiculous. The concept of justice remains relative, and moreover it can turn out to be a mere screen for our idiocy or very personal expectations. Authentic indignation is undoubtedly rare, compared to the many counterfeits or other caricatures. Certainly, indignation demonstrates our capacity to be moved by evil, an emotion that is constitutive of a conscious and autonomous subject, but it can also be the expression of a very personal frustration or dissatisfaction. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between what is ethical and what is psychological "need": one is high-minded, the other is lower and vulgar. The frequency with which it arises could be a criterion that distinguishes them: the one who is too often indignant has probably long since exhausted the value, the universal and substantial content of his emotional outbursts. One can well imagine that the "hero" of our history encounters a great many opportunities for indignation, a skill of his which he glorifies and from which he derives a certain amount of overstatement; as can be seen in his haste and the shamelessness he displays.

As for Nasruddin's angry reaction at the end of the story, we can wonder whether it is a primary reaction, a form of annoyance, retaliation, or whether it is really indignation. In the first case it would be a tit-for-tat, where the Hodja imitates the coarseness of the intruder, returning his image to him. In the second case, it would be a legitimate protest against a common foolishness that gives far too much credit to the trappings.

## Signs

"The cowl does not make the monk" says the proverb. However, according to social codes, it is indeed the cowl that makes the monk, since that is how it is recognized. Thus, when one sees the uniform of the policeman, the dress of the magistrate, the jacket of the pilot or the suit of the banker, one expects certain behaviors, certain principles, certain services, and one would be surprised, disappointed or angry if it is not so. Even though we know that in the absolute sense a uniform can be borrowed or usurped, even though we are aware that it is humans, fallible and corruptible, who wear these clothes, we expect a certain behavior, a certain ethic, even a certain ideal. And when the promise of the garment is not fulfilled, we feel betrayed. We forget that the finery does not necessarily correspond to the reality it is supposed to represent, that these fineries are in fact only an accoutrement or a disguise, that the frock is in fact a defrock. Nevertheless, we need these distinctive signs, these uniforms, these liveries, and this finery. Whether they are formal, established in a strict and determined manner by society, or informal, chosen arbitrarily by a small group of individuals or by a fashion, they make it possible to identify, to recognize and to know. There was a time when these formal clothing practices were much more widespread, which today seem rather outdated, to which, for example, teachers and students were expected to conform, although they still meet here and there. It should not be forgotten that clothing, beyond its practical modality, that of protecting us from heat or bad weather, also has a social modality, that which indicates a status, a moral modality, which indicates ethical values, and an existential modality, which indicates a way of being. Rocker, hippie, punk or gothic styles are examples of this. In these different cases, clothing acts as a promise: it announces who we are, it engages the one who wears it. We will thus find in the clothing psychological, cultural and social implications.

We can understand the disappointment of the visitor, for whom the nobility of the turban implies a kind of almost universal knowledge. How could one not know a language as important as Persian, a culture renowned in Turkey in Nasruddin's time, when one is a master. Thus the visitor is angry at what represents for him a usurpation of identity. But the master receives these "expectations" very harshly, he even becomes violent. How do we explain such a reaction? What is the story trying to tell us? The criticism of the relationship to clothing is a recurring theme in the Nasruddinian corpus. One will recall, for example, the story where the Hodja dips his sleeve in soup, since it is to his clothing that he owes his invitation. Or the one where he doubts his identity because he forgot to put on his turban. In this one, we can

say on the one hand that the story deals with the phantasm that the garment represents. On the other hand, it shows how clothing makes us forget the person, who then becomes an object of satisfaction of our expectations. Finally, in a more general way, it demonstrates how appearances take precedence over reality. Clothes, like any other abstract sign or symbol, taken in a disembodied way, necessarily imply one form or another of phantasm. If we give them the full credit they solicit, we will necessarily be deceived, we will necessarily be mistaken. Some people adopt a distinctive garment precisely for this reason, because they believe in it, and they may find themselves more or less in the long run disappointed, just as they disappoint others. By wearing the attire of the authority they seek, the identity they assert, we will necessarily fall short of our expectations, whether for others or for ourself. And it is precisely this phantasm that the present story seeks to bring to light. It shows us how we cheerfully combine our hopes and illusions, a combination that is most powerful in its ability to distort any reasonable or rational judgment. Whether the turban is worn by others or by ourself, it will never fully guarantee the commitment it formally represents. The question that may nevertheless be asked is whether expectations and illusory power are more powerful when the defrock is worn by others, or when one wears it oneself. One can also imagine that the hero of this story, considering the great attention he pays to the attire of others, takes great care of his own finery.

 Questions to deepen and prolong
**Comprehension**

- Why is the visitor scandalized?
- What characterizes the visitor?
- Is the visitor naive?
- Why should Nasruddin know Persian?
- Why is Nasruddin angry?
- Does the visitor treat Nasruddin as a "master"?
- What mistake does this man make in his way of thinking?
- Why is the turban important in this story?
- Could Nasruddin be more patient with the visitor?
- What is this story trying to show us?

**Reflection**

- \* Are appearances deceptive?
- \* What are the functions of a garment?
- \* Is clothing a revealer of personality?
- \* Is makeup a mask or a self-expression?
- \* Why do we need signs of recognition?
- \* Is scandal necessary?
- \* Is naivety a quality?
- \* Are those who embody authority superior to others?
- \* Should there be a hierarchy among men?
- \* Should we always listen to our feelings?

## Chapter 13 The poet

### Image and recognition

A man of the town who indulges in poetic pretensions asks Nasruddin to listen to some of his poems to get his appreciation. Knowing by experience this is a risky affair, Nasruddin tries to avoid the exercise, acknowledging his fundamental ignorance of poetry. But the man insists, arguing that he has a profound trust for Nasruddin and his renowned wisdom. Under constraint, the latter finally accepts. He patiently listens to the long declamation, and once finished does not say anything. “So!” says the poet. “So what?” says Nasruddin? “Well, what do you think?” “Do you really want to know?”. But once more, under pressure, Nasruddin is forced to obey. So he renders a very frank judgment: the work is turgid, pompous, vain and boring. At those words, the poet becomes red with anger, and for five good minutes, he screams at Nasruddin, throwing at him all the possible insults and most horrible names. When the man calms down, Nasruddin comments: “Well, your poetry is atrocious, but your prose is really excellent!”

As we all know by experience, it is quite difficult to engage in a real discussion, where interlocutors really say what they think. For a simple reason: like the poet of the story, we all have pretensions, we all want to be admired to a greater or lesser degree, and we all are doubtful and anxious about ourselves. Therefore, when we engage in a verbal exchange with someone else, we are always more or less looking for his consideration, for his approval of our words, of our deeds and actually of our whole being. We are begging for the eyes of others, because we are worried about the worth and meaning of our own existence. Of course, these expectations are not always as explicit as in the poet of the story, but they are present in filigree, as a sort of fundamental matrix of all human preoccupation and dialogue. The reason for this is not a very mysterious one: human existence is a construction. The animal is what he is: a rabbit is a rabbit, a tiger is a tiger, his life will look just like the one of his parents, except if the circumstances change. But by himself, he will act in exactly the same way: he has no capacity of free will, he will not criticize the way his parents live, he is engaged in a mere reproduction and imitation procedure. But the human being is quite different from this. Each one of us has known in a way or another the rejection of his parents, the criticism of the society he lives in, we have all thought at some point that we could do better than the others. Even though in the final results we might look a lot like the



people that surround us, we all know this little drama inside of us where we try to articulate something that is “really” ourself, some kind of individuality that is specific to our being, and that always bears some pretension to be better than others. Be it morally, intellectually, socially, artistically, we all search for some kind of particularity that provides us with an identity. There are different ways to address this question. The French philosopher Sartre speaks about a project: what we want to do and we will accomplish, we project ourself in the future and the sum of the actions we commit will ultimately resume the reality and substance of our existence. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant speaks about what he calls regulatory ideal, an idea that we use as a guide for our thoughts and actions, even though we will not be able to really and completely fulfill this ideal. In both cases, there can be, and most likely will be a big difference between what we wish to accomplish and what we will actually accomplish. This gap is often quite wide, and it gives us what another German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel calls “bad conscience”: the consciousness that we are not what we want to be, we are not what we could be, we are not what we should be. Plus we naturally and often compare ourselves to the others, these others who in our eyes have sometimes less than us, but often have more than us. And we become jealous because we generally are more preoccupied by what we don’t have rather than what we have. Just like children who see what the others have that they don’t have, rather than enjoying what they have already. We have different ways to deal with this terrible feeling of existential lack and failures, which takes the form of sadness, of despair, or anger. Sometimes, out of spite, we claim that we don’t care, that everything is fine with us, when rage is in our heart. Sometimes, we get depressed, since we cannot manage to be what we desire: we feel impotent, and we become even less what we want to be. Sometimes, we pursue everyone, desperately searching for some approval, begging everyone to grant us some kind of comforting words, even if they are not true. Sometimes again, we engage in some compulsive activity that will make us forget what we would hope for, in a sort of flight forward obsession. Sometimes, we transpose on others all our hopes and desires, for example on our children, loading on them all the pressure that we put on ourselves. Then we can ask ourselves: why can’t we accept the simple reality? But it is true than after all, the human soul needs to think perfection as a way to give meaning to its own existence.

 Questions to deepen and prolong
**Comprehension**

- Why does the poet want to read his poem to Nasruddin?
- Why does Nasruddin try “to avoid the exercise”?
- Is Nasruddin a liar?
- Was Nasruddin right to give his honest opinion about the poem?
- Is the poet right to be angry?
- What is the problem of this poet?
- Why does Nasruddin say the prose of the poet is better than his poetry?

**Reflection**

- \* Why do we want to show our accomplishments to other persons?
- \* Why does one write in general?
- \* Why does one write poetry?
- \* Why is it difficult to make judgments?
- \* Is it sometimes difficult to express our judgments?
- \* Why do people get angry when they disagree?
- \* Do we always expect something when we speak to other people?
- \* Can we say everything we think to other people?
- \* Why do we fear rejection?

## Chapter 14 It must be true

### Wishful thinking

Nasruddin is taking a nap. But some children are playing outside, disturbing his sleep. Irritated by the noise, he goes out and in order to get rid of the children, he tells them: “You know, there is a lady on the other side of the village who is getting married, and because of this, she is distributing all kinds of sweets, halva and lokums!”. When the children hear this, they immediately run away with their mouth watering. After a while, still not sleeping and noticing that the children are not coming back, Nasruddin tells himself: “I think I will go there too: what I said must be true”.

We utter many statements on a day-to-day basis. Some are thought through and well founded, some are impulsive or reactive, some are mainly the expression of feelings or emotions, some are information that we want to transmit, some are mere repetitions of what we heard or read beforehand, and some strange statements even come to us in spite of our own volition, that we often regret. But in one way or another, we necessarily think all these words that cross our mind and come out of our mouth, otherwise we would not pronounce them. To declare that the proposition “Paris is the capital of England” is false, I must first think and understand the idea that “Paris is the capital of England”, otherwise I could not criticize this statement and declare it false. But many persons will then use the following objection: “Yes, I can think it but I don’t believe it”. Or they use another formulation: “Yes, but I don’t really think this way”, considered as an equivalent. This implies that we put together the act of “thinking” and the one of “believing”, “believing” meaning “really thinking”, or thinking with certainty, thinking with a strong impression of being certain. Thus, to be certain of what we say would make our thinking real, and we call this “knowledge”: a sure and unquestionable thinking. But when we think in this way, we forget that the history of “sure and unquestionable thinking”, as shown in the development of science, is a mere endless series of rectified errors and modified hypotheses. But human beings need certitudes, we need to be sure, otherwise doubt and insecurity would make our life miserable, since we want to control and master everything. We can oppose to this idea of certitude a different perspective: the idea that knowledge is constituted as a set of “well justified beliefs”. This means that we have arguments in favor of this or that idea, or that the idea is coherent, that it is founded on some objective facts, that it emanates from some appropriate

authority, or that it is supported by some coherent theoretical foundation, all this without any degree of certitude. But in opposition to this we should mention as well the idea of the American pragmatist philosopher William James, who thinks that truth is determined in relation to what is most advantageous to us, therefore a very subjective foundation. Of course, most advantageous can have different meanings and values: it can imply what is most practical, what is the most efficient hypothesis, what fits better what we already know, or it can mean simply what pleases us the most in an immediate way. And the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard asserts in such a direction that truth is necessarily subjective, and not objective. Now, let us go back to the “truth” of Nasruddin. He tells the children something that has a purpose: to chase them away by attracting them somewhere else, so he can sleep. Even though his marriage story is false, because he just made it up, it has in a way a certain “truth”, since it is efficient: it works and the children leave. This idea that an invented story might be true will seem probably strange to our reader, but at the same time, that is how we think and speak commonly everyday. That is the whole point of the present story, the idea of its punch line: the invented idea works so well, since the children don’t come back, that Nasruddin starts believing it. That is exactly how myths are created: we invent a story, either from scratch, or by embellishing and transforming some more basic fact or tale, and when we see the effect it has on the listeners, through admiration or by what it makes them do, we end up adopting this story, making it true in our own mind, believing it. That is the same way by which societies create founding myths, about some hero or some event, transformed to speak more to the collective mind. So do we personally function, with our own childhood stories for example. And we are surprised when someone who had previously known these events has a totally different version of it. We are so “certain” about what we know. Let’s not forget another reason for Nasruddin to believe the story: just like the children, he is gourmand, he loves eating. It is not an accident that the way he thought of in order to chase the children was not some kind of reasonable explanation or the classical threat of punishment, but rather appealing to the sweet-tooth tendency of the children. In fact, he is all ready to believe his own words, since it comes from the bottom of his heart: such an argument seems so advantageous to him that he cannot resist believing it. And the simple fact that the children don’t come back from their wild goose chase constitutes a sufficient “objective” fact for him to completely swallow his own lie. Of course, the way it is told in this story is made to sound ridiculous by showing us the process in a short and blunt way, but let’s not forget how this way of thinking is commonly practiced in a very stupid and

naïve way. We invent stories and end up believing them. But after all, why would not we believe our own words if they please us and if they seem to fulfill their task?

 Questions to deepen and prolong

### Comprehension

- Why does Nasruddin invent the story of the wedding?
- Why do the children believe Nasruddin?
- What other ways could Nasruddin use in order to make the children go away?
- Why does Nasruddin believe his own story?
- Is Nasruddin lying?
- Is Nasruddin stupid?

### Reflection

- \* Should a child always believe an adult?
- \* Why do people lie?
- \* Do we sometimes tell ourselves lies?
- \* Can we end up believing our own lies?
- \* What is the difference between telling a story and lying?
- \* How can we decide if what we hear is true or false?
- \* Do you like to invent stories?

## Chapter 15 The donkey

### Truth and friendship

Ahmet, Nasruddin's neighbor, wants to borrow Nasruddin's donkey. He goes to Nasruddin's house to ask if he can borrow the animal, explaining he needs it, because he has some important and very hard work to accomplish. "My donkey is not here", answers Nasruddin, bothered by the request. But as they are talking, Ahmet hears from behind the house the bray of the donkey. Hee-haw! Hee-haw!

Ahmet gets angry: "What kind of friend are you, you who claim your donkey is not there when it is actually right here, in your garden! I just heard him!"

And Nasruddin answers: "And you, what kind of friend are you, who prefer to believe my donkey, rather than believe me!"

There are two main problems posed by this story. The problem of truth and the one of friendship. Let us remember at this point the warning of Plato, his idea that truth and friendship do not go very well together, since the last thing we expect from friends is to tell us what they really think, which would at length risk to make us uncomfortable and produce mutual irritation. About truth, let us examine the statute of the donkey "speech". Of course, we laugh because one would not expect to believe a donkey, since "believing" applies only to human speech, or God's, but not to the animal. Then why does it not apply to animals? Now that we think about it as we read the story, we realize that in fact animals always tell the "truth", however strange this idea seems. And the reason they always tell the truth is because they cannot lie, although some will object that animals are sometimes cunning, like when they want to catch a prey. But even though it is rather true, for all practical purposes, let us leave this path on the side, if only because lying implies a certain form of consciousness and moral responsibility that does not apply to the animal. Therefore, man lies because he is free to invent to reality, because he is not condemned to the acceptance of ruthless and objective facts, as we often observe in the words we hear every day: illusion, feelings, hopes, fear and desires determine a lot what we say about reality, even when we pretend to be objective. One reason for this is that pure facts hardly exist for us, since everything has meaning, and this meaning, be it symbolical, emotional, spiritual, rational, scientific, or else, transforms "natural" reality into "human" reality. The other reason is that this very potential of man to transform reality gives him as well a strong capacity to wishful thinking, as well as a capacity to

say the opposite of what he “really” thinks. In other words, there is duplicity in man’s heart and mind, for the better and for the worse, and even confusion, between subjectivity and objectivity. Thus, in a funny way, the donkey’s “speech” is more reliable. If only because through his braying he is stating his own presence, when a human being is capable of the statement “I am not here”, a gross performative contradiction, between the content of our speech and the speech itself. Although indeed the latter can have a plausible sense when taken in a second-degree interpretation, or when the “here” has different meanings.

About friendship, we sense in the narrative how this term can become meaningless. Is a person coming to borrow something from you really your friend? Is a person that lies to you really a friend? Is a person that refuses - selfishly or legitimately - to lend you something you need really a friend? Are people really your friend because you are useful to them? Friend is a word that is so much used that it becomes meaningless, as we see in the popular Facebook concept for example: “I have 353 friends...” We all behave in a way like school children that from one day to the next change their mind: we declare someone to be a friend, who then become a sort of “worse enemy”, according to the circumstances: we apply this term in a very indiscriminate way. Thus Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle distinguish friendship based on utility, friendship based on pleasure, and true friendship. We are quite familiar with the first two types: but what defines the third is rather a mystery. Who does not have terrible stories about friends that revealed themselves not to be friends? Because in general we have expectancies in our relationship with people, that turn a lot around convenience and needs, whatever their nature: material, relational, psychological or else. Thus the narrative sends back to back the two neighbors through their mutual recriminations against each other, showing the fragility, the shallowness or even the emptiness of their friendship, which is nothing else than being convenient or inconvenient neighbors, being pleasurable or not, being useful or not. Then of course comes the trust problem, fundamental in friendship or any human relation: should you trust a friend because he is a friend, or because he says things that make sense? How much can you trust a friend that states crazy things, even though he guarantees or swears it is true? Here comes the moment when we have to determine if we have more trust in ourselves, our experience and our capacity of judgment, or in the other person. A tough decision, where friendship and reason are at odds. Followed by the second problem: if we don’t believe our friend, should we tell him, or should we lie in order not to hurt his feelings, in order not to lose him? That is the moment where our relationship to our friend and to



truth will show its true face and reveal itself.

 Questions to deepen and prolong
**Comprehension**

- Why does Nasruddin not want to lend his donkey?
- Are Nasruddin and Ahmet friends?
- Why does Ahmet call Nasruddin “friend”?
- Why does Nasruddin call Ahmet “friend”?
- Should Ahmet believe Nasruddin or the donkey?
- Is Nasruddin a liar?
- Is the donkey telling the truth?

**Reflection**

- \* Do animals always tell the truth?
- \* Why do human beings lie?
- \* Can we lie for good reasons?
- \* Should you always believe your friends?
- \* Should you always believe your family?
- \* Can people be friends for bad reasons?
- \* Why are people friends?
- \* Would you believe more a friend, or yourself?

## Chapter 16 Inch Allah

### Words and thinking

One day Nasruddin was going to the market to buy a donkey. On the way, he met his friend Ali, who asked him where he was going.

Nasruddin answered: "I am going to buy a donkey from the market."

His friend scolded him: "You shouldn't speak like this! You should always add "Inch Allah!" at the end of your sentence."

Nasruddin answered hastily. "This time, there is no need to say "Inch Allah!" Because the money is in my pocket and there are lots of donkeys in the market, so I know for sure what will happen!" And off he went.

Some time later, Nasruddin was returning from the market when he saw his friend again.

Ali asked him: "So, what happened at the market? Why do you not have a donkey with you?"

Nasruddin answered sadly: "Somebody stole my money, Inch Allah!"

There are different aspects to this story, which deals before all with the matter of words, what they are and how we use them. First, there is the idea that we must speak in a certain way, not only because of language but as well because of customs, forms or rituals. This is what in general we call politeness, or respect: we have to speak like it must be, by following the established rules. Not to behave according to the tradition is a lack of respect for society in general, for our specific interlocutor in particular. Plus in this case, there is the added feature of religious belief, which brings some extra weight on the formula that should be used. Second, there is the power of words, what they can provoke or bring on us. Since the dawn of time, there has been the idea that words are not just words, but they bear some kind of supernatural power: especially they can grant us wishes and protect us from evil. They are our natural intercessors with the divine, what we share with the divinity. The divine words are given by the God, or by the gods, and men can pronounce them. Thus to pronounce certain specific words is a must, an obligation toward the forces that power of the universe. The words empower us; deprived of them, we are powerless or even cursed. In this case, Inch Allah! means that it is up to God to grant the wish of buying a donkey: man proposes and God disposes. The one who forgets this is a miscreant, a pagan: he is a bad person, and he will be punished for his pride by providence. And that is what we see in the story. Nasruddin has forgotten his statute, the one of a humble creature, powerless in

the hand of God, so he will lose his money and therefore not get the donkey he wanted and was so sure of getting, in a conceited way. Once punished, he will try to use the words, but too late: time does not go back. Words cannot be used in any way and at any moment. There is a proper time to use them, and an inadequate way, even a stupid way. In this case, if you can ask God's help for the future, you must know that for the past, his wish has already been accomplished, time will not roll back. But Nasruddin ignores all this: he acts in a primitive way. He ignores the nature of words, how to use them, what they can accomplish and not accomplish. This brings us to the third point: we don't always understand what we say, we are not always conscious of the meaning of our own speech. Words are not just sounds that we pronounce according to the circumstances, according to the utility. The dog barks when he is angry, he squeals when he is suffering; he expresses different emotions with a few different sounds, not so many. Human language is much more complex. The art of "sounds" is very elaborated. It implies understanding and consciousness, not just some instinctive and copying procedure. But that is very difficult: at different degrees, we don't always master the significance of what we say. Our mastery of language is often very approximate, we don't fully seize the meaning of words. In particular the different levels of speech, its polysemic potential, its symbolical and interpretative dimension. We repeat, but we don't know, which produces sometimes awkward results, like in this case with Nasruddin. He is told he has to pronounce the invocation "Inch Allah!" after some specific sentence expressing a wish in the future, he repeats it in a silly way after a sentence concerning the past. Of course, his silliness is not totally deprived of meaning: he hopes the past would be made anew, in order to reestablish a new future where he would not lose his money. He does not realize that words have a way to be used; it is not some cheap trick that one can use without thinking, by imitating someone else in different circumstances. This problem is a common one in different Nasruddin stories, because it is very common in human practice. That is the last important point of this story: the change of behavior, due to events, as a reaction to what is happening. We can call this the principle of reality. As we already mentioned it, Nasruddin thought that his project was a sure thing, he was in full control, he did not even need to say the usual words: he was careless because of his ignorance and his pride. But reality caught him, showing him his own fragility and excessiveness, his lack of measure. Once punished for this, he tries to catch up and backtrack, but to no avail: too late, there is no return. But this as well he does not understand: he still does not get the principle of reality: he practices an extreme form of wishful thinking. He thinks he can always get what he wants. In this sense,

he is very coherent: he cannot learn in a profound way, and his incapacity to learn should make us learn about our own incapacity to learn.

 Questions to deepen and prolong

### Comprehension

- What is the general purpose of the invocation “Inch Allah”?
- Why does Ali want Nasruddin to say “Inch Allah”?
- Is Ali right to scold Nasruddin?
- Why does Nasruddin initially refuse to say “Inch Allah”?
- Why does Nasruddin finally say “Inch Allah” ?
- Does the “Inch Allah!” of Nasruddin make sense?
- Did something change in Nasruddin?

### Reflection

- \* Can we go back in time?
- \* Do we master our own future?
- \* Can we claim that we are free?
- \* Is it wrong to be sure about our accomplishments?
- \* Why do we regret sometimes our own behavior?
- \* Is pride a problem?
- \* Is there a right and wrong way to speak?
- \* Should we speak like everyone else?

## Chapter 17 The toothache

### Me and other ; identity

Nasruddin suffers atrociously from a toothache. But being rather soft, he is too scared to go to the barber that would take care of him.

His neighbor Ahmet, impressed by his red and inflated mouth asks him to open his mouth.

“By Allah! What an abscess! If I was you, and your tooth was in my mouth, I would have it pulled out right away.”

“ If I was you, so would I as well!” answers Nasruddin.

We all know those people that want to tell us what to do. Be they relatives, people we just met, or some kind of legitimate experts, they want to counsel us, to guide us, to advise us, generally with a feeling of confidence about the legitimacy of their thoughts and sayings. They do this sometimes because we asked them for this advice, but other times, even when we have not asked them for anything, and in some cases they talk to us with a lot of insistence, just like if they considered that we had to blindly follow their opinion, and anything short of that would be a terrible mistake, if not an attack on their honor. Some people seem to have a strong proclivity in wanting to support others, which in their mind means to take over this person and determine the course of his actions. Now, of course it is normal to want to help one's friend or relative, and even a person we don't know, following the precept of loving one's neighbor. We all do this to a certain extent to some people we know, and we all are happy sometimes, in difficult situations, when some persons come and tell us what to do, an advice we can then follow or not. But the two questions we can ask are the following. Does it really make sense to tell someone what to do? And to what extent does it make sense? It makes sense to tell someone what to do first because we have information that we suppose he does not have, or that he seems to have forgotten, or that he overlooks. Second because we think that person is weakened, helpless, in despair or in some kind of psychological stress, which renders him or her incapable of taking a decision or unable of making the appropriate decision. In this context, we might need help, and want some help, even when we don't ask for it. And that is when we should and could do the same for others. But where is the problem? When does it lose any sense to tell someone else what to do? If we observe attentively the conditions for telling the other what to do, we will see that we presuppose in this person a kind of difficulty, or handicap, paralyzing or blurring his decision making process.

Thus we propose to compensate this problem by deciding for him, directly or indirectly. Minimally, we try to influence his decision. This indicates first of all a lack of trust: we don't think the other is capable to handle the problem, so we want to do it for him, what we call "helping him". Of course, if this person already lack self-confidence, this "help", even though it solves the immediate problem, will not help him build any self-esteem: it reinforces a dependency on other. This consolidates the idea that there is a hierarchy, with the ones that can and the ones that cannot, what the philosopher Immanuel Kant calls a "state of minority": the incapacity of using one's understanding without the direction of another. The person in this state begs permanently for comforting and reassuring from external authority. One does not learn by his own personal experience, although totally irreplaceable in one's life. The second symptom it indicates is impatience: the counselor cannot wait for his interlocutor to make up his mind by himself, a slow process that will take the time necessary: he tells him, he gives him the "answer" already made, ready to use. His true motivation is totally selfish: he wants to feel better, he cannot stand the tension and the uncertainty, like many "bad" teachers or parents that cannot stand the void of the child's thinking process and hesitation. In this pattern, the counselor can live vicariously through the counselee, as a sort of second life, as sometimes the parents do with their children, abusively, asking them to do what they cannot do or have never done. Putting all their hopes in this new life. A kind of fusion operates here. Of course, the counselee can himself deliberately engage in this type of confused identity, where seduction is another form of power play: the power of the weak on the strong. I ask, but I know better: I make the other one feel strong and necessary. As many children do to reassure themselves and please their parents. Nasruddin refuses totally any such pact of identity transfer. As he says, "If I was you, so would I as well!". In other words: other is always other, it is outside. The outside person only has a formal knowledge; his understanding is not connected to experience. In this case, he is not the one that will suffer the pain and anguish of the tooth extraction: his thinking is theoretical and not incorporated. In a certain way, you can only trust yourself, and you should only trust yourself, because you will be the one that has to deal with the consequences of the decision. The counselor will not be there at that point, even though he is physically present. Autonomy is the experience of a profound loneliness, but as well an experience of empowerment of the self, an apprenticeship of trust in oneself, and therefore trust in others, because this trust is conscious and deliberate, not compulsive and fearful. Then the dialogue with the other can be real and productive. Because there is no confusion on who is who.



 Questions to deepen and prolong
**Comprehension**

- Why does Ahmet ask Nasruddin to open his mouth?
- What does Ahmet recommend Nasruddin?
- Does Ahmet use a good argument?
- What is the motivation for Ahmet's advice?
- Does Nasruddin accept the recommendation of Ahmet?
- What is the motivation of Nasruddin's answer?
- Does Nasruddin's answer make sense?

**Reflection**

- \* Should we always trust the advice the others give us?
- \* Why should somebody else decide for us?
- \* Why are we concerned with other persons?
- \* Why do people tell each other what to do?
- \* Are there good and bad reasons to tell other persons what to do?
- \* Can we suffer for someone else?
- \* Can we take someone's place?

## Chapter 18 The scholar

### Wisdom

A famous professor was jealous of Nasruddin's reputation as a man of wisdom. In order to challenge the Hodja and prove to everyone that he is a much wiser man, he sends by courier a list of forty extremely difficult questions that Nasruddin is supposed to answer. The Hodja receives the list of questions, carefully reads them one by one, and each time writes as a response: "I don't know". His wife Leyla, a practical woman, observing the repetitive writing of her husband, tells him: "Since you cannot answer any of them, why don't you write just once and for all "I don't know" for the whole thing, instead of repeating so many times the same thing." Hearing this suggestion, Nasruddin replies: "Oh ungrateful woman! Don't you see this poor man has spent all his efforts trying to spread his knowledge for me. The least I can do, with my answers, by sheer politeness, is to spread my ignorance for him."

This story provides us with interesting insights into the nature of knowledge, its hidden function or nature. Let's remind ourselves that in the history of man's genesis as told by the story of Adam and Eve, knowledge played a fundamental role, just because this faculty is attached to the essence of the human being: man as a rational animal, as Aristotle said. And the emergence of each individual, its growth, recapitulates in his own self the history of the whole humanity: the Homo sapiens (the man that knows). The story goes, with different variations, that Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge, which was forbidden to them: they only had permission to eat from the tree of life. And by eating those fruits, the devil told them they would be as powerful as God, since they would know the secret of "good and bad". Of course, this means that they would have access to consciousness, to moral conscience and knowledge, and not be children anymore. With all the harsh consequences of "growing up", as we commonly know them: work, responsibility, etc. We see here that the concept of knowledge is intimately related to the concept of power, and therefore to the different aberrations power might engender: pride, jealousy, fear, competition, vanity, possession, and lie. The problem with knowledge is that it has in general a positive connotation, unlike power, that carries a more ambiguous image. All parents want their children to acquire knowledge, for different reasons: to be smart, to have a good social image, to reach success in their social life, to get a good job, etc. And of course, since the children are an image of their parents, they sort or

prolong their own finite existence: in reality, the parents want this “image supplement” for themselves, to obtain through their children what they could not realize through their own effort. Knowledge thus represents a motivation for life, what allows us to accomplish something and give meaning to our own existence, but as well it is the trap for some of the more trivial and vicious aspects of human behavior. Let’s now go back to the professor of the story. He is famous, but his reputation is not sufficient for him: like a child, he wants more because someone else has something that he does not have; in this case, fame. He wants everything, he can never be satisfied, his status and reputation are never sufficient, thus he behaves like a fool. He is not preoccupied by truth or by sharing knowledge, or to enjoy what he has already for himself, he is obsessed by his reputation, by his fragile and anxiety ridden identity: the “other” is therefore an enemy, he wants to - or has to - prove that the “other” is a fool, to make himself look good. Nasruddin, in his usual naïve self, takes the letter as a “real” letter, and simply answers what he thinks, instead of pretending that he knows or understands: he has nothing to prove. The reader has to realize that it is not a “normal” way to behave, especially for a man of knowledge: one is never supposed to say “I don’t know” or “I don’t understand”. We are always supposed to hide our limits behind some kind of pompous verbiage. So when Nasruddin “spreads his ignorance”, he transgresses the basic rules of academia, at the same time mimicking them in an outrageous way. This reminds us of Socrates and his “I know that I don’t know”, with which he used to mock the pretentious sophists. The “spreading”, the idea of showing, of bragging, adds a dimension of absurdity to the gesture. His wife Leyla does not understand the issue behind this whole affair: she just wants to be practical about it: why repeat words in a useless way? This remark redoubles the irony against the histrionic scholar. Because she is like most people: she does not see that behind this problem of knowledge and ignorance, is played once again the drama of human existence. She does not understand the poor professor, his weak and painful identity, mirror-image of his arrogant appearance. By being practical, she plays the game, she goes along with the appearance, she accepts the professor as face value, as is commonly done. Leyla’s blindness is real blindness: she sees only appearance. Nasruddin’s blindness is depth: he sees behind the appearance, he has understanding and compassion. She sees the objective reality, the facts: knowledge and ignorance. He sees the intention, the reality behind the knowledge, the truth of the deed: the vanity of knowledge and the beauty of ignorance.

 Questions to deepen and prolong

### Comprehension

- Why would a famous professor be jealous of Nasruddin?
- What is the motivation of the letter?
- Why can't Nasruddin answer any of the questions?
- Why does Nasruddin criticize Leyla?
- What is the difference of thinking between Nasruddin and Leyla?
- What is the difference of personality between the professor and Nasruddin?
- What does Nasruddin think of the professor?

### Reflection

- \* Why are people jealous?
- \* Why is it sometimes difficult to say "I don't know"?
- \* Why is it bad to be ignorant?
- \* Is it sometimes good to be ignorant?
- \* Why do we want to spread our knowledge?
- \* How can knowledge be a problem?
- \* Why do we want to gain knowledge?

## Chapter 19 The preacher

### Teaching and learning

In this story, Nasruddin is a traveling imam. During his peregrination, he stops by a small town where the local imam just died. Hearing he is a preacher, a group of faithful comes to get him in order to give the Friday sermon. But Nasruddin does not really want to do it; he feels tired, lazy, and he declines the invitation. But the people insist forcefully, they really want to hear the truth of the good words, so Nasruddin finally accepts, grumbling. Once on the pulpit, he asks “Dear brothers, do you know what I will talk about?” And of course, being good Muslims, everybody answers in one voice: “Yes!” So Nasruddin replies: “Well then, there is no use for me to stay here!” and he leaves. But the people, frustrated of the good word, fetch him once more in spite of his resistance. Once at the mosque, he asks again the question “Do you know what I will talk about?”, and everyone, remembering the previous time, answers “No!”. To this, Nasruddin replies with a tone of anger: “Then what I am doing with such a bunch of ignorant, infidels and pagans!”, and he leaves in a huff. But the faithful, unflagging, although somewhat irritated by now, fetch him once again, and in spite of his protests force him to come back for the third time. Everybody is now getting ready for the terrible question. “Well, do you know what I will talk about?” asks he dramatically. But the faithful are confused. “Yes!” shouts half the crowd. “No!” shouts the other half of the crowd. So Nasruddin concludes: “Well I propose that the ones who know explain everything to the ones who don’t know!” and he leaves.

The preacher is a very interesting story that poses the paradox of teaching in a Socratic way: thinking for oneself instead of listening, learning and repeating. Socrates was known as a strange kind of teacher: he was going around and questioning his interlocutors, so they would find out some answers by themselves. Then he would question them again, in order for them to examine critically their own ideas. In general, flaws were found, obliging the person to move further in his thinking, modifying or abandoning his own initial idea. The consequence of such a practice was of course to irritate the interlocutors, for two reasons. First of all they had to find answers by themselves, which in itself is considered “tiring”. Second, they would be irritated at the fact they could not arrive at any certitude or fixed idea, absolutely true, but they had to keep on the thinking process, admitting the flaws of their own thinking. But Plato considered this practice as a form of wisdom: the knowledge of what we

know and what we don't know, implying the acceptance of the limits of our own knowledge, the flaws of our own thinking. Thus the postulate of such a way of teaching is that a teacher can only teach what the students already know, implying for example that it is not worth teaching someone if the ideas involved do not already speak to him. If it does not speak to him, he has first to change his attitude and find some echo within himself. If it does speak to him, he can then teach himself, to the extent he is willing to work on his own thinking and knowledge. For this reason, the students actually do not need a teacher, as tries to show Nasruddin when by three times he leaves the assembly. What he proposes, without explicitly saying it, is that the group teaches itself through some reflexive interactions: an internal dialogue with multiple voices. Thus the way the group can become a "teacher" is through discussion, a sort of mutual teaching, where each student is a teacher, where each teacher is a student. From Nasruddin's or Socrates' perspective, the "lazy" teacher, or "foolish" teacher is therefore a good teacher: he gets the students to be active and "force" them to mobilize their own knowledge and be creative. This is the substance of Socratic maïeutics: learning through questioning and answering, through dialogue. And of course he does not explain this to his students: he expects them to figure it out, it is part of the process. He acts this way because he trusts them, even though he treats them in an apparently "rude" way, which can hurt their "feelings". He does not try to be loved by his students, he does not attempt to "seduce" them and be popular, and he should not be worried that they be angry at him or that merely stay at the level of appearance and judge him badly for his laziness. That is the risk to take: he trusts that time will do the work. Because no lecturing, even the "best" and most pedagogical explanations guarantees profound understanding: in a way, the more there is speech from the teacher, the less there will be understanding and intellectual growth from the students. This is not merely teaching, but education.

As any teacher know from his experience, many students will act as the faithful and expect from the "authority" the good word, if not the truth itself, especially when they have difficulties they want to resolve, or simply because they want to be charmed by a "beautiful speech". And when they ask questions, if the teacher invites them to answer by themselves, they will be very unhappy because they do not get what they want, not understanding that the "person of knowledge" does not fulfill what they consider his "normal" duty: provide information and explanation. But the real work of the teacher here is to teach students to trust themselves, not by providing ready made knowledge, which would prolong an infantile relationship to the authority, but by posing problems and paradoxes that will make students become conscious - by them-

selves - of their own dependence, the childish statute of minority that they impose on their own self. This situation is even more acute when someone is looking for “motherly” consolation or comforting, asking for a soft touch that will make them feel better or less insecure: for those, such a teacher behavior is actually intolerable, it will make them feel rejected, and in a way rightly so, since they are frustrated of their expectations. Nasruddin’s practice is pitiless, a lack of mercy that might just have its own legitimacy. It might make one angry, but on the long run, it might make everyone think in a more profound way.

 Questions to deepen and prolong
**Comprehension**

- Why do the people want so badly Nasruddin to speak to them?
- Why does Nasruddin ask the people if they know what he will speak about?
- Why do the people answer “yes” to the question?
- Why do the people answer “no” to the question?
- Why does Nasruddin behave in this way?
- Did the people learn anything with Nasruddin?
- Is Nasruddin disrespectful with the faithful?

**Reflection**

- \* Is it better to learn by oneself or from someone else?
- \* Why do we want to hear what we already know?
- \* Why ask questions when we already know the answer?
- \* Should we always answer questions posed to us?
- \* Does faith need confirmation?
- \* Do we always want to know the truth?
- \* Does the truth come only from specific persons?



### Searching and finding

Late at night, Nasruddin and his neighbor come home from a feast. While trying to open his door, Nasruddin drops his key on the sidewalk. Hearing this, his friend comes to help him find it. But Nasruddin leaves him in the dark and start searching in the middle of the street, where beams a beautiful moonshine. His neighbor, surprised, asks him: “Why are you looking for your key over there? You lost it over here!”. To which Nasruddin answers: “Do as you wish! I prefer to search where there is light!”.

This story is very famous in various forms, under different climates. It has sometimes lost some of its strength and significance by losing the context, when it is known for example as the story of a drunken man, which somewhat implies that his idea makes no sense. On the contrary, the fact it comes from Nasruddin, known as wise even though foolish in appearance, invites the listener not just to laugh at the silliness, but to search a deeper meaning, a significance behind the surface. That is the general principle of Nasruddin story: a paradoxical form of logic, a logic beyond the logic, a wisdom which invites us to look in a critical way at the usual form of wisdom, to go beyond established opinion and common behavior. And indeed this story is important and rich, since the symbols it deals with - lightness and darkness, lock and key, searching and finding, closing and opening - deal directly with the question of truth and the path to truth. For often, when he is in need and searching something, man prefers to look where he thinks a priori the desired object is, instead of where he could have a better chance of finding it. We think we know, and this is the reason why we don't find what we want. We think we know what we need, what we are looking for, we think we know where to look for it, we think we know how to look for it. When we finally find it, we are surprised: we had preconceived idea. We observe this quite often in our life, in diverse situations and contexts: faced with a problem that we cannot solve, we feel hopeless, until we realize that the solution was right in front of our eyes but we could not see it. Discovering this evidence, we tell ourselves “How stupid could I be!”.

But the paradox would still be too simple, if it was not that the story could be understood in exactly the opposite way. Since we can state as well that most men, just like Nasruddin, search what they seek in the place and the mode where it is more comfortable: one searches truth where he prefers it to

be, even though he has no chance to find it in this very place. It seems easier to look for truth where we are at ease, rather than where it is arduous. Thus Nasruddin going where things are more visible takes the easy option, since he sees better in the place enlightened by the moon, even though he lost his key in the dark corner. Depending on the interpretation, Nasruddin either is behaving in the correct way – although appearing foolish - or is behaving in an outright foolish way. Maybe in this incertitude lays the crux of the matter: truth may necessarily be of a paradoxical nature, since we cannot tell what is wise and what is foolish. We never know what is light and what is darkness since both are as blinding one as the other.

The main problem resting in this ignorance, is that incertitude is one of the most unbearable situations the human mind knows. We want to know “for sure”. Many ideas come to us, opposed to each other, and because we feel uncertain, we claim we don’t know, or even that we cannot know, an incertitude from which comes despair. But we sometimes prefer as well to take refuge in this certitude of ignorance, ignoring the profound sense of impotence and the resentment that comes with it, to the risky incertitude of making a decision, to the anguish of indetermination. Or, in order to avoid this problem, most of us will cling to certain ideas or principles, that we will repeat forever like some incantatory mantra, and whenever we will be asked to look elsewhere and envisage different ideas, we will forcefully refuse to relinquish what we consider “our ideas”, like a snail so attached to his shelter that he will shrivel up inside his shell whenever anything strange or new seems to threaten him. Therefore, if we hear Nasruddin well, our main task is to invite ourself or our interlocutor to think bold and daring thoughts, thoughts that are bold and daring merely because we are not used to think them: they seem awkward and strange. We can call this “thinking the unthinkable”. And once these thoughts appear, the problem is to hear them, accept them and even enjoy them; at least for a short moment. For even if those thoughts come from itself, the individual mind wiggles and giggles in order to avoid those ideas and reject them, because our own unpredictable thoughts, like unwanted children, make us feel uncomfortable. That is why the German philosopher Immanuel Kant tells us: “Sapere aude” (dare to know).

 Questions to deepen and prolong**Comprehension**

- Why is Ali astonished by Nasruddin?
- What is the logic of Nasruddin?
- Who is right, Ali or Nasruddin?
- Who sounds more normal, Ali or Nasruddin?
- Does Nasruddin know something Ali does not know?
- What does the key represent?
- Are there different ways to understand this story?

**Reflection**

- \* Must you know what you are looking for in order to find it?
- \* Should you look for things only where you think they are?
- \* Is it necessary to look for things in order to find them?
- \* Do we want to control everything we do?
- \* Can foolishness be sometimes a wiser behavior?
- \* Why do we often want to act like everyone else?
- \* Why is it difficult to change our own way of thinking?

## Chapter 21 The two wives

### Choosing and recognition

Nasruddin has two wives, his older wife Leyla and her young cousin, Ceren, but both quarrel a lot to know which one their husband loves best. They regularly ask him which one he prefers, but Nasruddin, rather coward, who likes peace in the household and does not want to risk himself to such a dangerous endeavor, cautiously prefers to avoid answering their questions, answering that he loves both equally. But one day, the two women, tenaciously try to corner him while he was peacefully sitting in his favorite sofa, and ask him the following question: “Suppose that the three of us are in boat and both your wives fall in the water. Which one do you help first?” Nasruddin hesitates then answers: “Well Leyla, I think that at your age, you must know a little bit how to swim!”

Note:

A variation of this story is known among Turkish scholars as the “Talleyrand story”, told as a “true” story where the role of Nasruddin is replaced by the famous French diplomat. We still retain this story in our selection, since it fits the nature and form of a genuine Nasruddin story. Was some original story applied to Talleyrand, or did the Talleyrand story become a Nasruddin story? We don’t know, and it does not matter. Because it seems to us that this kind of ambiguity or incertitude very much fits the living spirit of this type of narrative, as well as the mixture of reality and fiction, of singularity and universality.

Once again, this story captures a number of different issues. In appearance, Nasruddin is a coward, lying in order to avoid problems, for at the end of the story, we “discover” he actually prefers his younger wife. Thus, without explicitly admitting it, he has chosen. This claim to indifference is a very common attitude: many of us, facing an alternative, answer with the following type of words: “I am indifferent”, “Equally”, “Both”, “It does not matter”, etc. But the German philosopher Leibniz claims this is impossible, with the following idea: “In what relates to being, there is no neutrality”. We might be ignorant of our inclination, of our tendency, of our asymmetry, but we cannot be exactly in the center, or be totally indifferent: we cannot avoid being on one side, or at least to be leaning toward one side more than the other. The problem is then to determine if this display of indifference is real ignorance, or affected ignorance. But the red line between knowing and not knowing, or being not wanting to know and not being able to know, is sometimes hard to establish. Leibniz explains this through the fact that so many minute per-

ceptions and feelings fill up our conscience, what he calls swarming, that it is sometimes difficult to sort out the result. In the tradition of Freud, we can claim that this is the unconscious, rather inaccessible and autonomous. But the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre says this is “bad faith” speaking: we can indeed know what is operating inside of our mind - the unconscious is only the backyard of consciousness-, and if we cannot find out by ourselves what we think, we can assume that our entourage, friends or relatives, neighbors or colleagues, will let us know in one way or another how we are, will make us conscious of ourselves. And of course, in the case of Nasruddin, we can imagine why he prefers not to say and probably not to know; just like him we often prefer to claim indifference, rather than admit our subjectivity. We generally don’t like to reveal ourselves, if only because it shows our weaknesses, or because it gives a grip on our being to people surrounding us. And often, the bad faith shows at the moment where it is obvious that we have made a choice, but claim nevertheless to be neutral: a very common behavior. For example, when we hide a criticism or a rejection behind some “objective” remark, as Nasruddin does in this story, when commenting about the swimming capacity of his older wife.

Another reason why we prefer not to admit our preference is that it is a way to avoid making decisions: by claiming certain neutrality, we can pretend to hold simultaneously all the options, we can claim the right to all the possibilities at the same time. Choosing is full of consequences, and any particular choice implies the finitude of self: it recognizes the limits of our being, the reduction of our power, since by choosing we necessarily have to give up some of our options. Hence Nasruddin is very human again, by claiming he has no preference. At the same time, the parallel issue is the one of recognition, for if we don’t like to choose, at least not in a conscious way, on the reverse not only do we like to be chosen, but also we want at all cost to be chosen, one way or another. Like the two wives of the story, we are always competing to be the chosen one: in love, in possession, in glory, etc. To be “the elected one” is to be special, it gives importance to our self and meaning to our life. Otherwise, we blend in the generality of humanity, feeling utmost loneliness through lack of recognition, a perspective that is equivalent to a symbolic death. To be loved, or its equivalent, to be the first, or to be the only one, remains therefore a major existential issue. But although Nasruddin acts as a coward by not answering, as a liar for not admitting his choice, as a macho for not taking in account the sensitivity of his wives and as a brute for answering the way he does, he actually deals in a profound manner with the issue at stake through the way he resolves the problem raised: the appeal to autonomy – knowing

how to swim. Indeed, being “older”, Leyla should know better than hope or search for outside recognition; by behaving in such a way, she sinks in some form of psychological and existential dependency. She should worry less about the other’s opinion of her, be more distant about the perception of her self, be less involved with comparison and competition, and deal with reality in a more autonomous way. According to the story, she will be disappointed and pay dearly for this kind of endeavor, and for the curiosity that goes with it.

The last interesting point of the story is the nature of the choice made by Nasruddin. Or course, without admitting it explicitly but still rather blatantly, he is choosing the “newer” one. Indeed, this is the classical choice: like children tend to do, we often think that newer is better. The “old” wears out through time its effect of attraction. This is not to say that there are no banal reasons as well to choose the “old”, if only because we are used to it, because of habit and familiarity, but often, when it comes to desire, even if it is for as short time, we can easily be “seduced” by the attractiveness of the “new”: for the distraction it provides from the “usual”, for the pleasure of its “exoticism”, for the curiosity provoked by the “still unknown”, for the “freshness” of the “youth”, for the pleasure of the surprise, etc. In a certain way the fascination with babies, be they human or animal, is of the same order. But of course, the attraction for the new can be criticized as ephemeral, since the “newness” is logically never a lasting quality: either it engenders boredom, or it naturally tends to be replaced by some “newer” object. If the reason of the attraction only the “newness”, it is bound to disappear more or less quickly.

 Questions to deepen and prolong
**Comprehension**

- Why do Leyla and Ceren quarrel?
- Why does Nasruddin try to avoid answering the two women?
- What would Leyla want to obtain?
- Did Nasruddin finally really answer or not?
- Should Leyla be happy with Nasruddin's answer?
- What is the criterion Nasruddin uses for his final comment?
- Is Nasruddin a good husband?
- Are the two women satisfied?

**Reflection**

- \* Why is it often hard to choose?
- \* Can one love two persons equally?
- \* Are there different kinds of love?
- \* Do we prefer to love or to be loved?
- \* Why do we become jealous?
- \* Is love rational?
- \* Does love engender happiness or unhappiness?
- \* Should polygamy be forbidden?

## Chapter 22 The turban

### Responsibility

Nasruddin while on a trip stops late at night at the inn. “There is only one room left, with two beds, one of which is already occupied” explains the innkeeper. “No problem!”, says our hero. “Just wake me up at dawn: I have to leave early. And don’t make the mistake, I am the one with the turban!”, adds he, while taking it off his headdress and putting it on the chair next to the bed. At daybreak, once awakened, he rushes out and leaves on his donkey. At mid-day, seeing a fountain he wants to quench his thirst. While bending over, the water mirrors him, and he notices his head is bare. “What an imbecile this innkeeper! Exclaims he, irritated, I told him explicitly: the one with the turban. And he woke up the wrong person!”

“I am fine and the world is wrong”. Or “It’s their fault”, is a recurrent theme in the Nasruddin corpus, to shed light on a typical human mental habit. Especially when this takes place in the context of intense activity, when the busy little beings we are have no time to think, take no time to think. The “other” is the easy way out, like we observe it with small children: the famous “He made me do it!”, an instinctive form of self-defense. Another form, more subtle and very classical, is the Cassandra syndrome, the prophetic style: “I told them and they did not listen to me!”. Once again, the form of the “argument” or its internal localized “logic”, biased, thwarted and extremely subjective, is nevertheless relatively coherent. After all, Nasruddin did tell the innkeeper to wake up a man with a turban, and he did not pay attention: he woke up a bare headed man... You really cannot trust anyone. Of course, we laugh when we hear the punch line of this story: Nasruddin is foolish, his reaction is so exaggerated that most of us don’t identify to his behavior: it does not look like us, we have never displayed or witnessed such a crazy way of thinking. That is because we forget too easily, if we don’t connect to the exaggerated behavior that is described there. But how many of us rationalize in very strange ways, in order not to feel guilty, in order not to feel stupid, in order to let our anger express itself on someone or something else than ourself. Other persons are very useful: they allow us to deviate and elude self-criticism, but circumstances constitute as well a quite popular and efficient way to defend ourselves from any responsibility. The thorough description of processes and surroundings of an event concerning us can very well seem to constitute an unavoidable context which can very well account for any of our action, depriving us quite



appropriately from admitting any wrong doing. This type of functioning can be sometimes extreme, and surprising if we pay attention to it. To the extent that some persons, inhabited by rage and resentment, are ready to publicly denounce a sort of conspiracy working against them, be it with their relatives, their colleagues, be it even with the whole world, an evil coalition that is of course working against them, in a totally unfair way: “It’s not me!”, “They are all against me!”, “Why always me?”. There intervenes the victim principle: by being a victim, we are always right; this position provides us with an explanation for everything. We feel important since we are the center of a huge plot! Not forgetting that the fact we are in pain makes us very important, especially when we are convinced that nobody understands us, that nobody can understand us.

What is at stake here, beside the question of avoiding personal responsibility and taking the time and liberty to think? It is once more the problem of universality, of objectivity, of reason, of reality. The tendency for each one of us is to produce a speech that fits us, that makes us feel comfortable. This usual speech, we don’t even have to think about it, it comes naturally, as a defense mechanism, as a sort of drive of our ego who wants to survive and protect itself: we are ready to think and say just about anything in order to rationalize our little self and the image it projects, in order to provide ourself with a good conscience. And if someone dares to attempt interrupting it, or contradicting it, either we claim his own speech makes no sense, or we just send him back to his own personal subjectivity, which is not more legitimate than ours: it is just his opinion, his against ours.

The insight or help that Nasruddin provides us here is the understanding of the gap or discrepancy between any “particular reason” or “subjective reason” and the wider ranging reason, common sense or universal reason, which Descartes claims is “the most widely shared thing in the world”: the capacity to think coherently, a gift that all human beings share as a condition for understanding each other. Often, when we think, we only refer to some “home made” rationality, a sort of private mental architecture that we inhabit, in which one might consider that we are just a blind prisoner. Thus, to think in a rigorous way implies to momentarily step out of ourself, becoming some other non-personal self, that would think otherwise, in a more universal way. Or at least to imagine another way of thinking, different or opposed to our initial manner, a mental shift that implies to take a certain distance from our usual subjectivity: thinking from someone else’s perspective. Just like if we would entertain a discussion with a neighbor, with the common man, with a group or persons. At that point, it can be hoped that by reasoning in such a

fashion, we could get a glimpse of the arbitrariness or the foolishness of one's own path, we could become conscious of the limitedness and bias of our own thinking. And if for some reason, which may seem legitimate or not for the subject, one wants to maintain his particular positioning, he will do it with a more conscious mind, which is the whole point of adequate reasoning. Plato says that thinking is entering in a dialogue with oneself, which implies that two different positions are taken: in general this can mean our subjective thinking and our universal thinking, our desire and our reasoning. The requirement here is therefore to double oneself, as Hegel invites us to do, as a condition for consciousness: in order to think, we have to see oneself thinking. The mind has to become an object to itself, on which it can act. It has to dare see itself thinking, in particular when it is indulging in all those little ratiocinations it knows so well how to concoct in order to feel more comfortable. And the role of philosophizing here is nothing but to create the conditions where we can see our own foolishness. "To become conscious of our own absurdity", wrote Albert Camus.

 Questions to deepen and prolong

### Comprehension

- Does Nasruddin trust himself?
- Does Nasruddin trust the others?
- Why does Nasruddin call the innkeeper imbecile?
- Is Nasruddin fair?
- What is Nasruddin's main problem?
- Why does Nasruddin need an image to see the problem?
- What is the logical mistake Nasruddin makes?

### Reflection

- \* Why do we mistrust ourself?
- \* Why do we mistrust other persons?
- \* Why do we accuse others wrongly?
- \* What are the reasons we make mistakes?
- \* Is it difficult to recognize one's own mistakes?
- \* Why do we want to see our own image?
- \* Do we like to see our own image?

## Chapter 23 The pumpkin

### Reasoning and certitude

While taking a walk, as usually Nasruddin was observing his surroundings and meditating. He passed in front of a field, where he saw many pumpkins, big and ripe. Immediately, he remarked to himself how it was strange that such a big fruit would grow on such a small plant. A little bit later, he saw a walnut tree, and he remarked to himself that it was strange again that such a small fruit would grow on such big tree, a real waste, he added to himself. He concluded that the world was badly done, and that there was lot of room for improvement. Then, tired of his walk and his heavy thinking, he decided to take a rest under the walnut tree. During his sleep, a walnut fell on his head and woke him up abruptly. When he understood what had happened to him, he picked up the walnut, looked at it, and exclaimed himself aloud: “Thanks God for not listening to me when you do things! I imagine what would have happened if a pumpkin had fallen from the tree.”

Proud as he is of his rational faculty, man thinks he is endowed with knowledge, he claims he can reason. He knows, and proud of his certainties, he does not hesitate to pass judgment and lay down the law. Now and again, however, when he is willing to, he realizes how simple minded, or even stupid and crazy he is. What he took to be profound or sensible thinking was just mouthing opinions and quibbling. For there are many reasons why our wildest ranting cannot imagine the fullness of reality, let alone exhaust it. In many traditions, however, two books teach us what to know and how to think, two books that are at the origin of all we know, two sources that teach reality to men. One is the book of the world, what we can observe, the other is God’s book, or revelation, the truth coming from the mouth of prophets or inspired men. On the one hand, nature lets us see and understand the reality of all existing things. On the other hand, the holy book, the Prophet’s sayings, or wise men’s intuitions, tells us that there is a reality beyond the immediate reality that surrounds us: there are principles, causes, an origin, which constitutes unavoidable truths putting our knowledge and our being in perspective. In the above-mentioned story, as in many religious messages, the logic of man collides with ‘God’s logic’. Of course, Nature is true to ‘God’s logic’, because it is its immediate expression. In principle, science cannot contradict faith, since the history of science questions established knowledge, and faith deals with absolute knowledge. But we have to add to this the following clause: we

never understand perfectly the divine word. As Nicholas of Cusa wrote, “every possible human assertion of the truth is a mere conjecture”. Popper spoke of a ‘principle of fallibility’. We have every right to think and to think that we know, but we must keep in mind that our knowledge is scanty, limited and fragile. It is so first because many pieces of information are missing from our personal “encyclopedia”, so that we leave out facts; secondly because our reasonings are tortuous, false or badly formulated, so that even if we had all the information, our mental processes would still lead us to the wrong conclusions. That was the case here again, with Nasruddin, as usual, because he could see only one aspect of the problem: that of the matching sizes, without thinking that the biological processes are far more complex. But at the same time, the lesson he is taught sounds even more ridiculous: he thanks God and only discovers his own limitations because he was not knocked out by a pumpkin! In other words, he discovers that God is great thanks to the most incongruous, limited and absurd observation and logic. And there lies the paradox that makes us laugh: the disproportion between the discovery itself and the reason why he made it. Once again, we do not know whether Nasruddin is stupid or brilliant, and the strength of the story lies in this ambiguity or paradox, as it provokes a cognitive dissonance in our minds. In the usual way of functioning, when we address the scholar or the philosopher, we do it in order for them to give us the appropriate information, to tell us about the reality of things and or how to think better. We listen to them so that we too, just like them, can become wise and learned. On the contrary, Nasruddin invites us to become stupid as a condition for becoming wise, in a way to become children again. A very confusing demand for us, this request for simplicity! But the confusion that this demand creates in our minds is the condition for thinking, according to Plato. A confusion that obliges us to come out of our usual mental paths and habits, in order for new processes to initiate themselves. Thus, even if we do not know what to make of this story, it gives us food for thought, as an infinite meditation, all the more so as its *vis comica* deeply affects us. But a question remains: how does Nasruddin teaching operate, since most persons telling and hearing the stories do not take the time nor make the effort to think it through? It seems that the merely intuitive relation to it, striking our memory, affects our way of thinking, like some natural “thought experiment”. An effect that is increased through the repetitive process: we hear these stories at different moments, there is an echo of it in the surrounding culture. So, even though no scholarly analysis of the story is carried out, it plays its role. Everyday language might even refer to this story in order to put a message across, as an analogy or a metaphor. Thus one might say: « It’s like Nasrud-

din's walnut », an expression we can hear in Turkey, referring to some evidence that was not so evident, or to some evidence that did not make sense. Finally, it remains to determine if philosophy consists in using the narrative in order to elaborate concepts, as we are doing here, or if it rather functions through evoking it in everyday life, as a story that tells a lesson to be learnt again and again. Opinions diverge, but we think that philosophy must retain this double nature: creating concepts as well as a narration mirroring and guiding man's existence.

 Questions to deepen and prolong
**Comprehension**

- How does Nasruddin come to the conclusion that the world is badly done?
- Why does Nasruddin thank God?
- What mistake made Nasruddin initially?
- Why did Nasruddin change his mind?
- Is there any problem with Nasruddin's final conclusion?
- Is there anything right in Nasruddin's thinking?
- Is Nasruddin a wise man or a fool?

**Reflection**

- \* Is the world well made?
- \* Can we understand everything that we see?
- \* Does everything have a reason to exist?
- \* Does nature make mistakes?
- \* Do you know any principle governing the world?
- \* What main mistake do we make when we think?
- \* Is human thinking reliable or not?