



Learning to philosophize with Nasruddin Hodja

By Oscar Brenifier and Isabelle Millon

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Introduction

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

In the beginning of the *Hippias minor* dialogue, a discussion sets in between Hippias and Socrates, on the question of who is the best man in the Iliad, between Odysseus (Ulysses) and Achilles. The debate centers on the issue of lying, and Hippias claims that Achilles is a better man because he does not lie, contrary to Odysseus, who is the most cunning and does not hesitate to hold a false discourse. At a certain point, Socrates shows that Achilles makes as well statements which are not true, but Hippias then uses as a defense of his hero the fact he does not lie consciously: he just changed his mind, but he is very sincere. A debate Socrates concludes by claiming that Odysseus is better than Achilles, since when he lies, he very well knows that he is lying, so he knows the truth more than Achilles.

We would like to use this example of a classical philosophical text to introduce what we can call the '*via negativa*' – negative path – of philosophical practice. We call it '*via negativa*' just like the traditional concept of '*via negativa*' used in particular in theology which is commonly used to determine for example the nature of God through the denial of what he is not. Thus Socrates defends lying in order to defend the truth, with the same irony that he claims his own ignorance in order to teach. And what is here used in a more conceptual and rational way is encountered as well in more playful way by the clown, the actor, the novelist, the caricaturist, the humorist, etc. All these very common modes of expression describe or stage certain schemes, behaviors, characters and situations, as a way to denounce them and obviously prone the opposite of what they represent. Thus the pretentious, the selfish, the hypocrite, the ambitious or any other typical defect will be presented in such a ridiculous, gross or exaggerated fashion, that this scenic posture will evidently criticize the ones who are affected by these defaults in order

to encourage the quality opposite to it. Or at minimum, it represents a 'Know thyself' injunction.

An interesting aspect of this scheme is the large proportion of 'unsaid' in those modalities of expression, which leaves tremendous room to ambiguity, and at the same time a lot of space for freedom, since it does not saturate meaning, since it permits multiple representation and interpretation. The emergence of the comedy in renaissance Europe is a clear example of this freedom to criticize, both society and the power in place, therefore giving permission to think. Or what allowed the court jester to play his role of mocking even the king while going unpunished was precisely the dimension and tremendous ambiguity, that for example allowed the punning, the spirited playing with words. Harsh criticism came out of the fool's mouth, but in such an indirect way that if one would get offended, he would reveal himself and become the laughing stock of all. The baroque conception where world and stage become one single entity, making us a distant spectator of our selves, is a good illustration of this general principle.

Philosophy and antiphilosophy

But negative theology is mystical and comedy is a mere show, when philosophy is supposed to be of a rather scientific order: it should found itself on reason, on logic, on demonstration, draw a system, therefore ambiguity, innuendos, allusions, exaggeration and other such 'literary tricks' are not exactly welcome. We can here just remember the Hegel lectures on Plato, where the mere fact that Plato tells a story like the Allegory of the cave signifies that at this time he is not producing a philosophical discourse. Philosophy can only be rational and scientific, and this Hegelian heritage will definitely model the face of philosophy. Therefore the image of the philosopher, as the nature of his productions,

tends to be wise and direct, more than foolish and indirect. After all, in a culture founded within the matrix of Christian values, let us not forget that the 'oblique' is the devil, for the devil is crafty. In French, the word 'malin' means smart or shrewd, but it refers as well to the devil, since it comes from 'malus': bad. The English word 'devious' has something of that order, since what is not straight seems suspicious, and what is deviant is devilish.

To be moral therefore means to say the truth, to say things the way they are, and to behave according to established standards of the good and the recommendable. In fact, in the mentioned Plato dialogue, Hippias shows a rather often occulted but fundamental aspect of the sophist: the sophist is the one who knows, he says the truth, he is the specialist of the good, the technician of knowledge, the keeper of rightness and morality. Callicles claiming that one has to follow his impulses and desires and Gorgias reducing speech to mere rhetoric is only an attempt by Socrates to show the fundamental immorality of such a position. Since, as Pascal said, true morality laughs at morality. And knowledge is in itself immoral, for its pretensions and hypocrisy, its fundamental negligence of virtue, its disdain for the good, and moreover its ignorance of being, its absence of being. The rational and moral speech is merely the discourse of convenience and convention, of good conscience, the philosophical correctness that Nietzsche criticizes as the 'small reason', in opposition to the 'great reason' of life, or when he denounces the illusory concept of human conscience. For even though this trend of negative philosophy is not the hegemonic one and is even contrary to it, it maintains itself as the regular 'other' of philosophy: its enemy brother, its shadow and denigrator.

This minority current of philosophy, this antiphilosophy, which pretends to show and shock more than it pretends to tell and explain, is already very present and visible within philosophy itself, for example in the character of

Socrates, and its devastating irony, this form of speech that says the contrary of what it says. What a historical joke we have there in Socrates, that we can recognize as the founding figure of philosophy, its hero and martyr, with someone that preaches the false to know the true, and even worse, someone that shows that we are condemned to falsehood since truth cannot be known. He had necessarily to be killed, he who preached an antilogic, for example in the Parmenides dialogue where every proposition and its contrary is both tenable and untenable. If the false is true and the true is false, we don't know anymore where we stand, we don't know anymore if we exist: the carpet has been pulled from under our feet. But what amazing freedom is given to us: the right to think the unthinkable, all the way into absurdity. Nevertheless, the agonistic dimension of this otherness, the crossing over on the other side of the mirror, the fragmented 'this sidedness' of reality which refuses the establishment of any system, of any conceptual and ethical map, is unbearable for both the common man and the knowledgeable man, since both compose, as raw or cultured as they are, the hierarchy of self evidence and good horse sense, a worldview where coherency has to be granted.

The cynic, with its total lack of respect for anything and anyone, provides in this context an interesting historical example: it is the rare case of a philosophical school whose name is used as well as a moral condemnation. Alongside with nihilism, although someone like Nietzsche will try to show that contrary to the appearance, the nihilists are not the ones who appear so to the superficial understanding. And what both cynicism and nihilism indicate, what they have in common with the Socratic method, is their power of denial, their heavy dose of contempt. It is not so much here the place to learn, but the place to unlearn. One should not teach principles, but on the contrary corrode those principles in order to think. Knowledge is here largely conceived in opposition to thinking, the former conceived here as a possession of fixed ideas that

crystallizes, rigidifies and sterilizes mental processes. So the main task of the teacher, if teacher be, is to untie or break the knots that knowledge represents, a knowledge that is characterized as opinion – be it common opinion or educated opinion, as Socrates distinguishes – in order to free the mind and allow thinking. Just like in eastern practices such as Zen, what is needed is to short circuit the usual paths of thoughts, seize them through some shock effect, by mean of some conceptual paradox, critical analysis or some strange behavior, which should hopefully produce some illumination. And when the mind will wake up to itself, it will know where to go, since mind is naturally inclined to think, unless it is hindered in its proper activity.

Methods

It is not doubt which makes one crazy, it is certitude' says Nietzsche. Even though the Nietzschean abrupt interpellation is definitely not the Socratic laborious questioning, they both agree on this idea that one's mind should not be jailed within its own thoughts. The thoughts we entertain necessarily stop us from having other thoughts, especially if those thoughts are the kind of general principles that determine what is acceptable and what is not. This has an echo in Heidegger, when he writes: 'What gives the most to think in our time which gives us a lot to think is that we do not think yet.' So we have to become a stranger to ourselves in order to think, we have to alienate ourselves in order to be.

The way Socrates operated this cognitive shock was through questioning, provoking the interlocutor into discovering his own incoherency and ignorance, a process which allowed the person to give birth to new concepts: *maïeutics*. For Heraclites, the struggle of contraries engenders being, so the emergence of those contraries allowed 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 in the most abrupt fashion toward him: by fornicating in public, eating with the hands, going around naked or living in barrel, by pretending men are not men, etc. All these theatrics should affect the individual mind more than any speech should do. In the Far East, the master would produce a strange paradox, or act in a strange way, and the student should by himself meditate on the meaning of it, without any explanations ever given to him. And in some schools, the master would not hesitate to become violent in order to produce the desired 'pedagogical' effect. A rather rash perspective which comes as a repellent for those that think philosophical practice is geared at making one feel at ease or happy! And a very 'unethical' posture indeed since the individual does not constitute his own end anymore: he is the mere instrument of truth. In a more subdued and formal fashion, Kant's antinomies are a conceptual reduction from the same inspiration.

The case of Nasruddin Hodja

There are different reasons why among a number of case studies of the negative way or antiphilosophy figureheads we chose Nasruddin Hodja. The first reason is that he did not exist as an actual person, and one of the requirements of our practice is precisely to develop the capacity of the person not to exist. 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 doctor, a teacher, or a judge, he can have no wife, one wife, two wives and does not hesitate to practice homosexuality, but more conclusive on the mythical aspect of his existence is the fact he is portrayed periodically as the jester of

Tamerlane, when the latter conquered Turkey only at the end of the fourteenth century. 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, a nature that is more conform to his being. Even his name changes totally, since in his fame around the Mediterranean he will come for example to bear the name of Jiha in Maghreb. And even 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 we chose him is the popular aspect of his person and what is told about him, for the nature of the tales that are told easily make him a folk hero, if only because they are funny and lively, and therefore efficient and pedagogical. Out of those stories, each listener will hear and understand what he can, with his own means, a phenomenon that is interesting to watch when one tells those different tales to different public. The reactions to the different contexts, to the degrees of subtleties, to concreteness or absurdity, will reveal more than many words who the listener is and how he thinks. Even the incomprehension of the story will be useful, since it will send back each one to his own ignorance or blindness.

The third reason is the width of the field covered by those stories, precisely because they represent a tradition more than a particular author. Questions of ethics, of logic, of attitudes, existential issues, sociological issues, marital issues, political issues, metaphysical issues, the list is long that can be drawn of the type of far ranging problems or paradoxes posed to the person that comes in contact with this body of critical knowledge. 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. But if the

'classical' philosopher will claim that the conceptualization and analysis – like the one we indulge in – is necessary in order to constitute philosophizing, one can as well respond that this formalization of the content can accomplish a sterilizing function and give the illusion of knowledge. But let's leave for another occasion the debate about the nature and form of philosophy. Although one hint that can be useful as a contextual information, is the close relationship of Nasruddin to the Sufi tradition, the latter which helped transmit the stories of Nasruddin, contemporary and neighbor of the great mystique poet Rumi.

The fourth reason is the terribly provocative personality of this living myth. At a moment where political or philosophical correctness tries to promote ethics and 'good behavior' to varnish the civilized brutality of our society, Nasruddin can be very useful, since he is endowed with about all major defaults of character. He is a liar, a coward, a thief, a hypocrite, he is selfish, gross, abusive, lazy, stingy, unreliable and impious, but especially he is an idiot and a fool, and a very accomplished one. But he generously offers all those grotesque traits of character to the reader, who will see himself just like in a mirror, more visible in its exaggerated deformity. He invites us to examine, accept and enjoy the absurdity of our self, the nothingness of our personal being, as a way to free our own mind and existence from all those pretensions that are geared at giving us a good conscience, but that do more to induce personal and social compulsive lies than anything else. His way of being deals a terrible and appropriate blow to the idolatry of the individual self, so characteristic of our occidental modern culture, to our factitious and permanent search for identity and happiness. Through his atrocious 'small lies', Nasruddin helps us set up in broad daylight the 'big lie'. And little by little, we would like to take the place of his best and eternal friend: his donkey.

The fifth reason is his free relationship with authority, whatever its nature. In front of religious, political, judiciary, academic or even domestic

authority, Nasruddin remains at once free and respectful. He is not afraid of revealing the hypocrisy or the lies of the ruling power, be it big or small – Foucault spoke of ‘micro-powers’ – and still acknowledges its real and necessary status. When he criticizes Tamerlane, it is for the latter to act with more justice or reason. When he criticizes the believers or an imam, it is in order that they better conform to the spirit of religion. When he criticizes a scholar, it is to invite him to be wiser. For, to Nasruddin, the real question of authority is that of self authority, the authority we grant ourselves, on the basis of truth and authenticity and not on artificial, arbitrary and conventional bases.

But for now let us cut short the rationalization of our own choice in order to comment and analyze some key stories of Nasruddin Hodja, from which we can get a sense of the significance of his philosophical content and the implications for life and understanding. Let us note however that the philosophical dimension has often been eclipsed by the mere narrative dimension. But our hypothesis is that the pleasure we experience in this *vis comica* includes an intuitive perception of the issue at stake, the transmission of popular but deep wisdom.

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...

1) 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!"

Analysis

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 our self 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 that after all, the human soul needs to think perfection as a way to give meaning to its own existence.

Questions to go further and prolong the reflection

Comprehension questions

- 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 questions

- 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?

Exercise : *Quarreling*

Explanation

Because Nasruddin says the truth about what he thinks, a dispute breaks out. Should he have lied, like we often do? In daily life, there are many reasons to quarrel, sometimes necessary or legitimate, sometimes vain and frivolous, some are avoidable others are not. The context and the reasons of this quarrel will determine the validity of the dispute. Even though we learn that in general disputes are bad, some are unavoidable or necessary, maybe even useful or good.

In this exercise, different reasons or explanations are given to justify a quarrel. The student must examine those different situations and determine which ones are more legitimate than others. He should then choose the three most acceptable and the three less acceptable, and motivate in each case his choice.

Instructions

In the following list of reasons to have a dispute, choose the three that are the most legitimate and the three that are less legitimate, and give reasons to explain each choice you make.

To quarrel

In order to defend yourself

In order to obtain what you want

Because of jealousy

Because of anger

To bother someone

To defend truth

To have the last word

Because you don't like someone

Because you are in a bad mood

To protect a friend

Because you had no real argument

Because you are scared

Because you are nervous

To scare someone

To provoke a fight

Because you hate injustice

2) 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".

Analysis

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 go further and prolong the reflection

Comprehension questions

- 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 questions

- 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?

Exercise : *To believe or not to believe*

Explanation

The typical school and home environment does not really incite the child to cultivate critical thinking, neither to practice personal and argumentative expression. In school, the student is in general not invited to produce a constructed judgment: when he is asked to give his personal advice, he often merely expresses his subjective and unreasoned sensitivity: his wish and desires. At the same time, we expect him to learn how to assess what he hears; we want him to judge in a wise manner, a capacity than can be developed only through exercising it. It is difficult to determine how much we should believe what we hear: it must be learned. The realization of the following exercise first bases itself on a good comprehension of the words used and the ideas expressed, then on a rigorous assessment of their implications and their limits. The child should

therefore not read them in an immediate and naïve way, but must evaluate their soundness, judge them and justify his judgment.

Instructions

Must you believe?

- Your father who tells you the dog speaks to him.
- Your grandfather who tells you your favorite football team will certainly win the next game.
- Your mother who tells you that the music you like is not beautiful.
- Your grandmother who tells you that what you eat is not good for the health.
- Your brother that tells you that your teacher is a bad teacher.
- The scientist that tells you that there are elephants living on the moon.
- Your teacher that says there is no school on Monday.
- Your best friend who tells you that you are the best of all friends.
- Your aunt that tells you that she is too old to change.
- A stranger who tells you that he will take you to the zoo.
- A child who tells you that when he will be older he will be President of the Republic.
- A child who tells you that when he will grow up he will have three children.
- The neighbor who tells you it will rain tomorrow.
- A friend who pretends he knows what you think.
- Your father who tells you that you are insolent.
- The newspaper that claims that the end of the world is coming.
- A movie star that advertises on television which car is the best.
- A famous singer who explains which perfume is the best.

3) Eat, My Coat, Eat

Appearance

The Hodja was invited to a banquet by one of his neighbor. Since it was not a formal event, he decided to wear his everyday clothes and went to the feast. Once arrived, he realized after a little while that no one paid any attention to him, including the host, who did not even greet him or offer him anything, as should normally occur. Annoyed by this situation, he went back home, put on his fanciest coat and pants, and then returned to the banquet. Suddenly, everything had changed: as he came to the stairs everyone already greeted him cordially, then he was invited to sit down, he was served the best food and drink.

But when the soup was served to him he deeply dunked the sleeve of his coat into the bowl and loudly said: "Eat, my coat, eat!". The startled host immediately asked the Hodja to explain his strange behavior. "When I arrived here wearing my everyday clothes," explained the Hodja, "no one offered me anything to eat or drink. But when I returned wearing this fine coat, I was immediately offered the best of everything, so I can only assume that it was the coat and not myself who was invited to your banquet."

Analysis

Who are we for others, our appearance or ourselves? The French philosopher Blaise Pascal claims that in general we are not loved for who we really are, but for our beauty, our character, our utility, for the pleasure we provide, etc. An idea that poses the problem of our identity: is there anything but appearance in who we are? Do we ever know our "real self"? Do we know and appreciate the "real self" of others? Are we even interested in knowing who we are and who they are? Like usually

with the Nasruddin stories, a common problem is presented in a caricatural or exaggerated way, in order to make it more visible. Because what happens everyday tends to become invisible: the ordinary disappears, it becomes neutral, usual and banal: it constitutes reality. In this context, Nasruddin's function is to accomplish what the British philosopher Bertrand Russell claims about philosophy: it makes the ordinary extraordinary, and the extraordinary ordinary.

But of course, when hearing this story, some readers will claim that they are not like that, they will pretend that they don't treat people according to their appearance or by the clothing they wear. Well, if we are honest with ourselves, in the rare occasions we encounter or meet a celebrity for example. Does not our attitude change, comparing to our normal way of behaving toward people? Don't we feel something strange, which impresses us and makes us react differently? Even though we might think in a rational way that our strange reaction makes no sense. How about when we speak to our boss, to our banker, to a professor, to some kind of expert or authority, or else? And fundamentally, is there any difference between the function or the title, and the clothing? Are they not both of them mere appearance? Why should we treat differently the celebrity and our next-door neighbor? Why should we treat differently the person that "speaks well" and the "normal person"? Are we not often seduced or impressed by those mere appearances?

To answer this last question, let's say that one is more "a person" than the other. Is not this what implies the expression: "he is really someone"? Some persons are "somebody" more than the other: the others are common, they disappear in the crowd, and we don't recognize them. When "someone" is a special person, he is singularized, he is treated differently. That is the problem the story deals with: recognition. So what is this recognition, this state we all desire and hope for, just like Nasruddin? It is to be identified from previous knowledge or encounter. This means that we are already known and that we are remembered. And if we are not remembered, we feel sad or even insulted. Because

implicitly, this recognition signifies the acknowledgment of one's existence. Through recognition, this particular existence is granted a definite value, since it is worth remembering. And we all want our being, our thoughts or our actions, to be appreciated or even acclaimed, as universally as possible, even though we are not conscious of it or we don't admit it. Often we call this respect, a certain image given to our name.

Of course, we can criticize Nasruddin for his lack of humility, for not accepting his "anonymous" statute at the feast. In this way he is very human, just like us: full of expectations. But the difference between Nasruddin and us is that he takes his "drama" with distance, with laughter. His "humanity" makes him a critic of society, in a very insightful way: he is not a victim of impotence and resentment. Thus his story is worth recognition. As well, paradoxically, it is when Nasruddin treats badly the other persons, making fun of them, criticizing them, that he is finally recognized. Just like in the law of the jungle: we instinctively respect the stronger, the one who imposes himself on us, we respect the one who does not respect us.

A last point, which should be brought up, is the paradoxical nature of appearance. The question is to know if the appearance hides who we really are, or if it shows who we really are. Does appearance reveal or hide reality? Since the appearance is what we see of something, we could think that it represents the reality of this thing made visible. There is no reason to think that the appearance of an apple betrays the "real" nature of the apple. There is no reason a priori to think that if someone looks like a fool he would not be a fool.

Questions to go further and prolong the reflection

Comprehension questions

- Why is Nasruddin disappointed with his first visit to the feast?

- Why did Nasruddin change clothes?
- Why is Nasruddin greeted well the second time?
- Why did Nasruddin soak his coat in the soup?
- Did Nasruddin behave in a proper way?

Reflection questions

- Does our clothing reveal who we are?
- Why is the way people dress so important?
- Should we trust appearance?
- Should we respect equally everyone?
- What is most important: appearance or reality?
- What is the difference between appearance and reality?
- Do we love people for what they are or for the way they appear to us?

Exercise : *Reality and appearance*

Explanation

Everyday we observe how appearance is important. At the same time, we periodically notice that it can be deceiving. Nevertheless, all appearances are not misleading, and when they are, it can be for very different reasons. Therefore we should try to identify different manners by which we find discordances between what things seem and what they are.

Different propositions are made concerning appearance and reality. In each case, we propose they don't concur, and the student must find some reason that could account for this discrepancy. In order to give a substantial account for this situation, the student should explain sufficiently his hypothesis and if possible give different reasons. At the

end, we could compare the different reasons to make a false judgment based on appearance.

Instructions

Answer in a reasoned manner those different questions about reality and appearance.

Can someone look like a foreigner and not be one?

Can someone seem nice and be the opposite?

Can someone seem selfish and be the opposite?

Can the teacher seem strict and be the opposite?

Can an object seem to be what it is not?

Do false things exist?

Can you wrongly believe someone is angry with you?

Can you sometimes take a person for another?

Can you believe you know something and not know it?

Are there true Santa Claus and false Santa Claus?

Can you wrongly be scared about something?

Can you wrongly trust someone?

Can something look good and be harmful?

Can I be mistaken about myself?

Can we believe what we see?

4) 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!"

Analysis

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 distinguishes 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 go further and prolong the reflection

Comprehension questions

- 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 questions

- 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?

Exercise : *Reasons to lie*

Explanation

In this story, Nasruddin is apparently lying, but maybe he has good reasons to do it. Of course, there are many reasons to lie, some better than others: some might be necessary, some might be good, some might be useful, some might be important, others might be silly, bad, evil, or just useless. Whatever the reason is, the act of lying has to be distinguished from the reason why we do it. Even though we want to call a lie with some other name than a lie, when we think that it is legitimate or innocent: for example oversight, mistake, invention, joke, compliment, embellishment, defense strategy, euphemism, etc. Of course, the

motivation of the “untruth” will help to qualify or pronounce a moral judgment on the act of lying in itself.

In this exercise, different reasons not to tell the truth are listed. The student must examine those different situations and determine which reasons are legitimate, which are not. Then decide if each of those situations should be called lies, or rather by some other name.

Instructions

Is it a good or bad reason not to say the truth?

Is it a lie or something else?

To avoid wounding someone

By ignorance

To gain time

To obtain something

Because it is ugly

In order not to scare a person

Because you are scared

In order not to hurt someone

When you have made a mistake

To keep your illusions

When you fear to be misunderstood

Because it is too hard to say

Because you want to be loved

Because you want to receive a gift

Because you respect your interlocutor

Because it is a secret

Because you are ashamed

Because you are not sure

To protect yourself

Because you would have to explain everything

5) 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!"

Analysis

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 go further and prolong the reflection

Comprehension questions

- 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 questions

- 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?

Exercise : *Who decides ?*

Explanation

Nasruddin thinks he controls everything, but he realized he does not decide everything about what is happening to him. We all have this

problem. Every day, we make decisions and act in manners that are more or less deliberate, conscious and free. Thus it seems important to invite the student to investigate this problematic, by interrogating him on diverse gestures and situations of his daily life, in order to determine if the actions he commits are voluntary and free or not. Naturally, as most times in this domain, freedom and determinism are interwoven, an ambiguity that should emerge during the work. Although ultimately, it will be necessary to arbitrate between those two concepts. A couple of questions the teacher can use, to help the student decide is: "Could you have done otherwise?" or "Were you forced to act in this way?".

During the work, it will be important to favor the production of diverse criteria allowing to decide how and to what extent these actions depend and don't depend on our sheer will. For example, here are some criteria for the first question: this depends on me because I could have stayed calm, or it does not depend on me because I am choleric, or it does not depend on me because Myriam provoked me. But whatever the dilemma is, one should finally decide.

Instructions

Are you the one deciding in those situations, or do you depend on the outside?

I became angry when Myriam called me an idiot.

I go to school.

I don't remember my lesson.

I dreamed of my favorite movie.

I like the same singer as all my friends.

I have taken the decision to work at school.

I had a fight with Peter.

I watch children programs on television.

I play football.

I take the bus number 18 and it takes me to the park.

I sneeze when there is a draft.

I speak to fast.

I don't dare to speak in front of the class.

I eat too much at night.

I am distracted in class.

I make noise with my mouth when I eat.

I obey the rules.

I obey my parents.

6) The toothache

Me and other ; identity

Nasruddin suffers atrociously from a toothache. But being rather soft, he is too scared to go 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.

Analysis

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 oversees. 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 lacks 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 go further and prolong the reflection

Comprehension questions

- 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 questions

- 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?

Exercise : *Identity*

Explanation

Nasruddin knows that he is not his neighbor: he is himself. But it is difficult to know who we are. We all try to find out who we are, and attempt to express our specificity. Many parameters define us, and numerous issues are at stake in this identification process: relation to others, relation to the environment, complexity of being, in its multiple dimensions and aspects, etc. In the present exercise, we will try to examine a few of the criteria that determine identity, trying to sort them out.

The criteria are presented by pairs, since they are related. Each time, the student has to choose one of the two as representing better his identity, and justify his choice. Thus the student will examine the relation he has with those different criteria, even though some of them will seem strange to him.

Instructions

Which of the two elements expresses better your identity?

Your name or your surname

Your family or your friends

Your body or your mind

Your origin or your nationality

Your work or your hobby

Your clothes or your hairdressing

Your gender or your age

Your strength or your intelligence

Your knowledge or your know-how

Your past or your future

Your dreams or your thoughts

Your friends or your enemies

Your mouth or your eyes

Your ideas or your character

Your actions or your words

7) 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."

Analysis

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 go further and prolong the reflection

Comprehension questions

- 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 questions

- 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?

Exercise : *Meaning of life*

Explanation

We all have a hierarchy of values, which we apply to our life, for ourselves and for society. In this story, the professor prefers knowledge and fame, Nasruddin prefers wisdom and tranquility. But we are not always conscious of our own values, thus we don't analyze them and examine

their real worth. And we are surprised by the choices that people make around us, what guides their existence. This can lead us to examine what values or goals would constitute for us, personally, a fundamental and worthy motivation, what would represent our main aim in life.

In this exercise, the student must order in a hierarchy the list of values and goals listed below. It would be difficult to justify each choice, so we ask to give arguments only for two or three of the extreme choices: the most interesting and the least interesting. In order to prepare the collective discussion, we can ask each student, in a second step, to criticize by writing some of his neighbor's choice.

Instructions

Examine these different possible values, or goals of life, and classify them, from the most valuable to the least valuable. Justify your first three choices and your last three choices.

To be a champion

Fame

Wealth

Tranquility

Happiness

Knowledge

To have children

To be loved

To love

Freedom

Power

To write books

To be a movie star

Wisdom

Peace

To hurt no one
To get what we deserve
Justice
To fight for a good cause
To be remembered after we die

8) 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.

Analysis

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 they 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 themselves

- 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 go further and prolong the reflection

Comprehension questions

- 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 questions

- 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?

Exercise : *Autonomy and dependency*

Explanation

The people want Nasruddin to teach them, but Nasruddin wants the people to teach themselves, to think by themselves with what they already know, what can be called critical thinking. He wants them to be autonomous. But it not always easy to know to what extent we are or we can be autonomous.

In the following exercise, we invite the student to determine if he is autonomous or not in a series of different activities. In each case, he first must give at least one argument in favor of autonomy and one argument in favor of dependency. Then we ask him not to stay in between and to decide what is more predominant in each case, and explain his decision.

The basic postulate of this exercise is that in each case, we are at the same time autonomous and dependent. Thus the role of the teacher is to insure the emergence of the two facets of each activity, and clarification of the stakes for each of them. For example, concerning "to obey the master", one can obey in an autonomous way because of respect for the adult or for the sake of learning, but one can also obey dependently so as not to be punished or in order to have good marks.

Instructions

Are you free or dependent in the following activities?

Give at least one reason for each side, then decide which side is more important.

To go to school.

To play.

To do what you want.

To obey your parents.

To read a book.

To obey the master.

To eat.

To have fun.

To work.

To practice a sport.

To think.

To go for a walk.

To travel.

To watch television.

To do your homework.

To help your family.

9) The key

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!".

Analysis

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 go further and prolong the reflection

Comprehension questions

- 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 questions

- 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?

Exercise : *Meaning and absurdity*

Explanation

Nasruddin behaves in a strange way, apparently absurd, but maybe this strange way has meaning, a more profound meaning. But to understand it, one has to change his usual way of thinking, if one is not too rigid. This happens regularly: we hear or read something that seems to make no sense, we reject it, and in a second moment we realize it meant more than we thought. We found the missing link, we went beyond the appearances, and we discovered the circumstances that gave meaning to the apparent absurdity. Like for any other activity, the mind has to train in this kind of practice.

Diverse sentences are given, that all gave reasons to explain the fact "I went out". First, the student must distinguish the sentences that seem to make sense from the one that seem to be absurd. He must explain why they make sense or are absurd. Then, he must add something to the "absurd" sentences, in order for them to become meaningful. The additions must be plausible and not state the contrary of the initial sentence.

Instructions

First, determine which sentences are meaningful, which are absurd, and explain why.

Second, create a context where the absurd sentences could become meaningful.

I went out because it was time.

I went out because I am out.

I went out because I was inside.

I went out because it was Monday.

I went out because the fox is a mammal.

I went out because the Martians were coming.

I went out because my mother came.

I went out because I did not want to.

I went out because I went out.

I went out because it was my destiny.

I went out because my friend came.

I went out because the television was on.

I went out because I had to.

I went out because the teacher did not want it.

I went out because I wanted it.

I went out because it's enough.

10) 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.

Analysis

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 perceptions 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 go further and prolong the reflection

Comprehension questions

- 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 questions

- 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?

Exercise : *Love*

Explanation

We can see in this story that Nasruddin and his wives don't have the same conception of love. Love is a complex and polysemic concept, and there are many ways to love. Already, we use it toward objects and activities, just as with persons. The word love can indicate extremely different realities. We will work on these differences by proposing a list of elements, beings, objects or others, with which we use the word love, a concept that we will analyze.

Each student will have to find elements, concrete or abstract, in order to specify and explain some of the different meanings of the term "love". It will be useful to distinguish the two manners of explaining that the students will use in their formulations: example or abstract idea. During the final discussion, we can regroup the arguments of similar nature, in order to clarify the issues. And if some student decides "not to love" something, he should anyhow specify the meaning of the word "love" in this specific case.

Instructions

How do you love?

Your parents
Your best friend
Your sibling
Your neighbor
Your teacher
Your grandparents
Your pet
Chocolate
A movie
Human beings
Sport
Yourself
Your image
Your name
Your idea
To eat
To play
Your favorite school subject
Your country

11) 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 midday, 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!"

Analysis

"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 ourselves 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 oneself, 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 go further and prolong the reflection

Comprehension questions

- 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 questions

- 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?

Exercise : *Responsibility*

Explanation

In this story, we observe that Nasruddin accuses the others wrongly, of something they have not done, when the problem came from him. This is a common behavior, but sometimes as well, it is rather difficult to determine if we are responsible or not for a problem, because different persons are involved in it. In a way, we are always both responsible and not responsible for what happens to us. We can use circumstances, ethics, psychology, compassion or pity in order to understand and determine the reality of our actions. And when we examine attentively the facts, we often feel split on the final decision of responsibility. In order to facilitate this task, it is important to learn to distinguish or separate the diverse criteria in order to clarify them.

Different situations of daily life are presented. The student must analyze them in order to determine the share of responsibility that behooves the subject. In each case, it will be necessary to describe in which way the person is responsible and in which way she is not, and to decide ultimately if she is responsible or not.

Instructions

In those diverse situations, am I responsible for what I do?

I shouted because he hurt me

I got angry because she insulted my parents

I did not eat because it was not time

I did not do the work because nobody told me anything

I did not help him because he did not ask

I left because nobody talked to me

I stayed because they told me
I had bad grades at school because nobody helped me
I had bad grades because I am not good at school
I had bad grades because I don't like school
I had bad grades because I had bad company
I got lost because I was given the wrong way
I did not understand because I did not hear anything
I did not say anything because I was scared
I laughed because my neighbor made a joke
I laughed because the others laughed

12) 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."

Analysis

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 Nasruddin'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 go further and prolong the reflection

Comprehension questions

- 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 questions

- 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?

Exercise : *Responsibility, reason, judgment*

Explanation

Nasruddin made a judgment on the world after observing it: he first thought it was badly done, then he changed his mind. Just like him, we make judgments every day. Some are rather objective, they are more logical and reasonable, others are rather subjective, they are more based on our impressions and feelings. But it is difficult to determine the nature of judgments, our own and other person's, especially if we don't distinguish the objective from the subjective.

In the following exercise, we propose different judgments, and invite the student to try to determine if they are objective or subjective, if they are founded on observation and reasoning, or on our personal bias, feelings or beliefs. In order to evaluate the statement and argue, one might have to produce circumstances or contexts, or give examples.

Instructions

For each of the statement listed, determine if it is more a judgment based on our feelings and opinions or a judgment based on our observations and reasoning. If needed, give an example.

Emily is lazy

Emily is always badly dressed

Emily is a good student

Emily is a braggart
Emily works well
Bus number 31 passes on time
It's Lionel's fault if he has bad grades
I fell because he pushed me
Lionel is taller than Julian
Lionel is wiser than Julian
Lionel is a better friend than Julian
Lionel is richer than Julian
Lionel is more respectful than Julian
Lionel deserves to be punished
The children make a lot of noise
The teacher is severe.