

NASRUDDIN HODJA, A MASTER OF THE NEGATIVE WAY

Oscar Brenifier

Abstract

Traditionally, the negative way is a process by which the mental process tries to reach truth about its object through negation of what it is not rather than through affirmation of what it is. In dialectics, the negative moment is one where we examine critically a proposition through the affirmation of its contrary. But in philosophy as a pedagogy or as a practice, there is a tradition, like with Socrates, the cynics or the Zen master, which are more concerned about interrupting the mental process and obtaining silence than explaining. Philosophy has here little to do with “science”, and more with an ascetic conception of “being”, where one shows the absurdity of speech, common or erudite. Consciousness therefore becomes the condition and substance of truth, in a sort of antiphilosophy. The XIV century Turkish figure Nasruddin Hodja has a lot to do with this tradition. Although he inscribes himself in the Sufi current, he is primarily known through his numerous, outrageous and funny stories, very popular all around the Mediterranean. But behind the comic surface of an oral tradition, we discover profound and provocative insights about the man, the world, language, truth, and many other subjects.

Key words

negative – antiphilosophy – philosophical practice – pedagogy – absurdity – consciousness

A - 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 leave tremendous room to ambiguity, and as 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.

1 - Philosophy as science

But negative theology is mystical and comedy is a mere show, when philosophy is supposed 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 mean 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. Calicles 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.

2 - Antiphilosophy



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 nihilist 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.

3 - Dialectics

"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. And those hypotheses are at the heart of the philosophical function as we see it: they found our philosophical practice. Therefore negativity becomes a major part of our activity, of the activity we invite our interlocutor to get involved in. The work of negativity, in a more conceptual way, as Hegel and others define it, is the work of criticism, the crucial step that allows and conditions



dialectical thinking. This is what the German philosopher defines as the moment following “A is A”, when “A is not A”. But the other form of negativity that concerns us here is more linked toward open-ended dialectics, when the synthetic moment that traces the path to the absolute is not definable, not even searched for. This is what we find in Heraclites, in Socrates, Kant and others: the aporetic perspective, the antinomy, the open ended tension that leads to the gap, to the abyss, leaving us with a intuitive and strong presence of the absolute, but an unspeakable one, the thought that Plato calls the unhypothetical, the unconditioned that conditions the conditioned, the indescribable vanishing point from which perspective every point can be described.

This general frame work might sound strange to the “reasonable”, “rational”, “down to earth” or “horse sense” practical person, for whom this looks irrational, unpractical, mysterious or even mystical. But it is indeed a very simple principle: it is more or less the reminiscence theory of Plato that operates. Everyone knows everything already, but one has to remember, a reminiscence that is the job of the philosopher in each one of us. We don’t know because we forget, and especially because we don’t want to know, we prefer not to know. So there is no use explaining something to someone when he does not want to know. There is only to attract his attention to his own attitude through some device that will surprise or seize him, and he will know by himself, unless the will to know is very profound.

4 - Methods

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. In order to think, you have to know that you operate from a biased partial perspective, from a limited postulate that could be totally inverted without any problem. For example the hypothesis that the universe is finite is not less valid than its opposite, the hypothesis that the universe is infinite.

To conclude this rather long preamble, let us add a few words on our own practice, in order to establish briefly how it inscribes itself in this current of “negative way”. Our postulate is that most questions we ask ourselves, most problem that haunt us, have their solution in our own selves, at least more than anywhere else. Thus our main task, with the person we engage in a philosophical dialogue with, is to become conscious of herself. First by asking her to be conscious of her own question: through analysis, conceptualization, explanation, and other forms of deepening the signification and implications of it. Second through inviting this person to observe carefully her own thought and behaviors and pass judgments on herself. Thirdly by periodically asking to take the counterpoint of her own ideas and dwelling in depth this counter perspective. Fourthly to accept and



enjoy the “unthinkable” that she has necessarily produced in the process, which most likely deal in a profound fashion to her own problem or question. But this particular way of working implies much resistance from our interlocutor, often stunned at her own ideas, and we therefore have to devise a battery of “tricks” in order to accomplish the described task and overcome the intense desire to tell oneself lies and stories of delusion, to avoid the denial. Some observers watching this practice criticize the fact that we work very closely with the words, just like if the words had a reality of their own. And we agree with this observation, since this is the way for us to talk about a practice. The words are not any more what we want, but they constitute an objective substance that oblige us to confront a “material” reality, what specifies a practice and distinguishes it from theory. The harsh relationship to the words makes the being visible, including its own tremendous capacity of self-denial capacity. Therefore we show and act, rather than say and describe, even though our work constitute primarily of words and ideas.

B - 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.

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. We cannot deal in such a short article with all the themes dealt with in the numerous stories, but we will give some insight on some of the important themes. As well, we will add some hints on the way that those stories can help in the teaching of philosophical practice, in the philosophical guidance or consulting work.

As a little philosophical reading exercise or meditation, we suggest to our reader, after reading each little story, to attempt producing his own analysis before reading ours, in order to appreciate the difference of interpretation, and we ask him to not hesitate send us his own so we can as well benefit from it.

1 - Teaching

The preacher

Nasruddin on a trip stops by a small town where the 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 and protests. But the people insist and he finally accepts. Once on the pulpit, he asks “Dear brothers, do you know what I will talk about?” And everybody answers in one voice: “Yes!” So Nasruddin answers: “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, and when he asks again the question “Do you know what I will talk about?” everyone answers “No!”. To this, Nasruddin answers with a tone of anger: “Then what I am doing with such a bunch of infidels and pagans!”, and he leaves in a huff. But another time again, the faithful, somewhat irritated fetch him, in spite of his protests, and he comes back. Everybody is ready for his terrible question. “Well, do you know what I will talk about?” asks he for the third time. “Yes!” shouts half the crowd.



“No!” shouts the other half of the crowd. So Nasruddin answers: “Well I propose that the ones who know explain everything to the ones who don’t know!” and he leaves.

The preacher is a very interesting story that poses the paradox of teaching in a Socratic way. The postulate of it 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 speak already to him, and if it does, he can teach himself. For this reason, the students actually do not need a teacher, as tries to show Nasruddin when by three times he leaves the assembly. And the only way the group can teach itself is through discussion, a sort of mutual teaching, where each student is a teacher. 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, therefore practicing Socratic maïeutics. And of course he does not explain this to his students: he expects them to figure it out, because he trusts them, even though he treats them in an apparently “rude” way, which can hurt their “feelings”. And he should not be worried that they merely stay at the level of appearance: his laziness. That is the risk to take. No teaching, even the “best”, guarantees understanding anyhow, especially when there are long explanations.

In our work as a philosopher, many interlocutors will act as the faithful and expect from us 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 they will be very unhappy if they do not get what they want, not understanding that the “man of knowledge” does not do his duty. But our work here is to teach them to trust themselves, not by explaining this to them, which would prolong an infantile relationship to the authority, but by posing a paradox that will make them become conscious - by themselves - of their own heteronomy, the statute of minority that they impose on their own self. This situation is even more acute when someone is looking for “motherly” consolation, asking for a soft touch that will make them feel better: for those, such a behavior is actually intolerable, it will make them feel rejected, and maybe rightly so. 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 him think in a more profound way.

2 - Truth

The key

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

This story is very famous in various forms under different climates. It has sometimes lost some of its strength and significance by loosing the context, when it is known for example as the story of a drunken man. 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 deeper, behind the surface. And indeed this story about light and dark, the key and the opening, deals directly with the question of truth. For often, when he is in need, man prefers to look where he thinks the desired object is, instead of where he has a better chance of finding it. But the paradox would be too simple, if it was not that as well we can affirm that man, just like Nasruddin, searches for truth where it more comfortable, where he prefers it to be, even though he has no chance to find it in this very place. So Nasruddin, depending on the interpretation, is behaving in the correct way – although appearing foolish - or he is behaving in an outright foolish way. But maybe in this incertitude lays the crux of the matter: truth maybe necessary of a paradoxical nature, and we never know what is light and what is darkness since both are as blinding one as the other.

In our practice, we have noticed that incertitude is one of the most unbearable situation the human mind knows. We want to know “for sure”. Many ideas come to us, and because we feel uncertain, we claim we don’t know, or even that we can’t know, a certitude from which comes despair. But we prefer this certitude of ignorance, including the profound sense of impotence and the resentment that comes with it, to the incertitude of knowing, to the anguish of indetermination. Thus 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. Our main task as a philosopher is to invite our interlocutor to allow himself to think bold and daring thoughts, thoughts which are bold and daring merely because we are not used to think them. We call this “thinking the unthinkable”. And once these thoughts appear, the problem is to hear them, accept them and even enjoy them, 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 thoughts, like unwanted children, make us feel uncomfortable.

3 – Choice

The two wives

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

Once again, this story captures a number of different issues. In appearance, Nasruddin is a coward, lying in order to avoid problems, since we “discover” he actually prefers his younger wife, choosing the “newer” being a classical choice, like children do. And a most common way to lie is to deny having preferences, refusing to recognize our own tendencies and subjectivity, thus avoiding making decisions by claiming a certain neutrality in order to detain everything at the same time. Choosing is full of consequences, and any particular choice implies the finitude of self. 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 wives of the story. 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, 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 points out in a profound way to the resolution of the problem raised: autonomy – knowing how to swim - is here the key concept. Indeed, being “older”, Khadidja should know better than look for outside recognition. She should have less worries about other's opinion of her, be more distant about the perception of her self, and deal with reality in a more autonomous way.

A frequent reason why one looks for the philosopher's company is the seaming meaningless of one's life. This absence of significance is often due to the feeling a lack of recognition: by the parents, the children, the mate, society, working place, peers, with the consequence of lack of recognition by one self. Many questions that will be asked, many issues that will be raised, have this situation as a background or as the only reason. At the same time, the reverse can be said, that the reason we look for recognition is that we don't accept or love our own self. And this is generally the case because we have a number of entrenched ideas about what we should be and what we are not. The role of the philosopher in all this is first to dedramatize the issue, but bringing in the reality principle in order to deflate the balloon, so actual thinking can take place in all sobriety. Especially since in general those issues, when one comes to discuss them, have taken quite an obsessive turn in the mind of their beholder. We are what we are, and life is not what our desires and fears make out of it. We know how to swim, don't we? We just forget that we know, and that is reason often we are capable to drown ourselves in a glass of water. And like a drowning person who refuses to be helped, whom motivated by panic even threatens and molests the helping hand, the needy mind will throw every stick and stones at her disposal to everyone around in order not to think, before admitting that this was nothing but a big “schwärmerci”, as Hegel calls it. The hustling and bustling of whirling emotions that looks like thoughts, but actually completely hinder any actual thinking. Therefore, how can the philosopher on those premises avoid being straightforward and rude? If in order to think one has to stop thinking – an excellent guiding principle - any indulging in a “nice discussion” might only reinforce the non-thinking. The reality principle is then an excellent master and guide.

4 – Morality and logic

The rooster

A couple of young men, known pranksters, wanted to play a trick on Nasruddin at the public bath. They each take one egg, hide it, and then propose to Nasruddin a wager. Each one will try to lay an egg, and the one who cannot will have to undress in front of everyone. Nasruddin accepts, and the two start wiggling their ass, clucking like hens, and finally drop their egg. Seeing this, Nasruddin lets down his towel, and visibly animated by an intense physical desire starts pursuing the two “hens”. The two young men, scared and scandalized at this sight, start screaming. “Nasruddin! What are you doing? Have you gone crazy?” “Well my little chicks, calm down!” answers the Hodja. “How can you lay an egg again if you don't let the rooster climb on you?”



A major theme covered by this story is actually a very common one in the Nasruddin story: the question of logic, of consistency and coherency, of sense, up to its limits, the confrontation to the absurd, to the senseless. A confrontation of meaning to meaninglessness, which explains why in so many of those stories, Nasruddin has all the appearance of a lunatic, of a fool, of an insane person. What is happening here? Two persons want to be smart, smarter than a third one, and the gain they get is that by making the latter a fool, they will prove their smartness to themselves and everyone. But the trap closes down on them, since Nasruddin takes their “game” even further, to such an extremity that they recoil and shriek: they fear for themselves and rules of morality are being breached. Who knows what can then happen! The reaction of the “master” is to teach not with words and explanations but with actions, unwholesome actions, with theatrics, for this will speak more, in a more striking and efficient way. In this case Nasruddin runs after his “students” in order to sodomize them in public. They thought he would be scared of exposing his nudity, and he exposes even more of himself, thus exposing them! We are here at the heart of antiphilosophy. Nasruddin shows rather than demonstrate. The immorality or foolishness of the pranksters initiative is not denounced by some kind of lecture or rational discourse, but by setting a course even more foolish or immoral, although some “open minded” modern readers might have a hard time with this aspect of things... Ironically, there is a pharisaic dimension to these two young men, very typical of immoral behavior: who, more than the immoral is more willing to denounce immorality, as they do here? Is it not a nice and easy way to pretend or regain certain “virginity”? Or simply because one is scared of pursuing or just envisaging the consequences of one’s actions. “This goes too far!” they will say: they are shocked! Just like if they were not already well engaged in this path. Nasruddin here is a teacher of the cynic kind, who wants to act as a mirror, by putting into light and amplifying a certain way of thinking. True morality laughs at morality.

The philosophical consultant has for major obstacle in his work what many a philosopher has called “good conscience”, although this “good conscience” has a mirror image: “bad conscience”. Moral conscience – a fundamental faculty - is often contrary to consciousness, although funnily in a number of Latin languages the word is the same. Since there is a “bad” judgment put on some of our thoughts and actions, we don’t want to see them for what they are. We want to feel good, we want to enjoy the feeling that we are on the right side of things, with the “good guys”, when the “bad guys” are way on the other side. As a result of this pressure, be it of personal origin, familial or social, the subject does not dare think what he thinks, does not want to recognize his own thoughts, or will refuse to pass judgment on them. There is a powerful form of self-denegation, a denial of one’s own thinking or desires, just to conform to some established principles or values. Nasruddin is here useful, since he invites us to freedom of thought and action, he incites us to abandon at least momentarily any fear of the “others”, their glare and their judgments. If one wants to please the others, look moral or intelligent, the chances are he will think and act stupid and immoral, even if the “others” grant him the expected award. Convention is a pact where by everyone agrees to act and think in the same way in order to congratulate each other. In order to think freely, the question is not simply to denounce systematically the conventions: this could amount to a mere reactive adolescent behavior. It is necessary to examine them, recognize their statute, evaluate them, their pros and cons, and determine with a “free” mind if they are worth abiding by. But unless one is capable in some way to break the law, the law is only a reign of terror, since no law, moral or legal can pretend to any kind of absolute. Therefore one should learn to respect the law, learn to violate the law, and especially learn when either is appropriate and necessary. At least in the perspective of philosophical counseling as we see it.



As for logic, the interesting point is that logic, often perceived as a constraint that “limits” our thinking, is here used as a crucial tool in order to become conscious of one’s own thinking. For indeed, as Nasruddin did, if we prolong the “logical” course of any perspective, we will have a good insight into its value or significance. As absurd as the ideas are, we will be able to think them instead of shutting our eyes in order to protect our good intentions, through pseudo-reasonable rationalizations. But we have to transgress certain well-established principles, for example the prohibition to exaggerate. The “logical” projections of our own ideas, however absurd they seem, is always a liberating and enlightening thought experiment, a simple procedure very useful for the philosophy practitioner. This is what the two young men should understand from their teacher.

5 - Fault

The turban

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. No problem, says our man. 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 and putting it on the chair next to the bed.

At daybreak 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!”

“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 little children “He made me do it!”. Other form, very classical, the Cassandra syndrome: “I told them and they did not listen to me!”. Once again, the form of the “argument” or its internal localized “logic” is very coherent. After all, Nasruddin did tell the innkeeper to wake up a man with a turban, and he did not: he woke up a bare headed man... You really cannot trust anyone. 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 conatus 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. And if someone dares attempt to interrupt it, either we claim his speech makes no sense, or we just send him back to his own reduced subjectivity, which is not more legitimate than ours: it is just his opinion. His against ours.

The insight or help Nasruddin provides here to the philosophy practitioner is the understanding of the gap or discrepancy between any “particular reason” and the wider ranging reason which Descartes claims is “the most widely shared thing in the world”. When someone comes to meet the philosopher, he outlines a “home made” rationality, a sort of personal architecture that he inhabits, in which he might just be a blind prisoner. So the role of the counselor here is to invite his interlocutor to momentarily step out of himself, by proposing to conceive some other imaginary self which would think otherwise, or that would have to entertain a discussion with the neighbor, with



the common man, with a group or persons. At that point, it can be hoped that the guest will glimpse the arbitrariness or foolishness of his own path, the limitedness of it. And if for some reason, which may seem legitimate or not for the practitioner, the interlocutor wants to maintain his position, he will do it with a more conscious mind, and that is the whole point. The requirement here is therefore to dedouble oneself, as Hegel invites us to do, as a condition for consciousness: in order to think, we have to see ourselves thinking. The mind has to become an object to itself, on which it can act. It has to dare see itself thinking, in particular in all those little ratiocinations it knows so well how to concoct. And the role of the philosopher is here nothing but to create the conditions of this visibility.

C - 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 Christ 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 we should beware of making a martyr out of Nasruddin, for he would laugh at us for such a silly and sentimental idea. Just one more trick we invent to feel good! At the same time, let us entertain silly ideas about him. 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 they are great fools. The question here is not to cure, if only because there is no way to cure, or because there is nothing to cure...

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.

Some extra stories (to be spread throughout the introduction)

The toothache

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

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

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

“ So would I!” answers Nasruddin.



The guest

Once more, Nasruddin has managed to enter a feast where he was not invited. But this time, the host has noticed his presence.

“What are you doing here, Nasruddin? As far as I know I did not invite you!”

“Well, Omar, it is not because you fail on your essential duties that it will deter me from the right path!”

The poet

A man of the town who indulges in poetic pretensions asks Nasruddin to listen to some of his poems. After patiently listening the long declamation, Nasruddin renders a very frank judgment: the work is turgid, pompous and vain. At those words, the author becomes red with anger, and for five good minutes, he insults Nasruddin, throwing at him all the possible names.

When the man calms down, Nasruddin comments: “Your poetry is atrocious, but your prose is really excellent!”

Ignorance

A man was jealous of Nasruddin’s reputation as a man of knowledge. In order to challenge him and proves he is much wiser, he sends a list of forty very difficult questions. The Hodja takes them, and one by one, answers “I don’t know”. His wife Khadidja, a practical woman, seeing this, tells him: “Since you cannot answer any of them, why don’t you write just once “I don’t know”, instead of repeating all the time.” To which Nasruddin answers: “Oh ungrateful woman! Don’ 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.

A good deal

Nasruddin has a job helping people cross the river on his back. Five blind men hire him and ask for the price. “Five coins” says he. He carries four of them on the other shore without any problem, but the fifth one is heavier and our man is getting tired. The blind man falls, gets carried away by the stream, and drowns. The others had heard his screams and ask if there is any problem. “Not at all! answers Nasruddin, on the contrary you have now a much better deal: it will cost you only four coins!”

The first one

In the middle of the afternoon, when everyone is taking a nap behind closed shutters, Nasruddin stays in the middle of the town square under a terrible sun. A neighbor sees him and asks him what he is doing there, risking a sunstroke when nothing is going on around there. Nasruddin answers: “Yes, but in case something happens, I want to be the first one!”



Words

Ali wants to borrow Nasruddin's donkey. "My donkey is not here", answers Nasruddin. But Ali hears from behind the house the bray of the donkey. Ali gets mad: "What kind of friend are you, you who claim your donkey is not there when it is in your garden!". Nasruddin answers: "And you, what kind of friend are you, who prefer to believe my donkey than believe me!".

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