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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

Seduced by the scholarly reputation of Nasr Eddin, a student comes from Konya to ask him many questions.

He asks about the names of God, the divine transcendence, the plurality of the universes and the star Sirius, and about so many other issues, one more complex than the other. Yet, every time, Nasr Eddin answers that he does not know. Eventually, the young man thinks he has lost his time with an impostor.

By God All-Knowing! Shame on you! I see that your renown is grounded on nothing. What do you know about it, answers the Hodja? I'm famous for what I know and not for what I don't know.

This book is about a question that has bothered humankind from the dawn of time: truth. However, it offers an alternative to classical inquiries into what truth is made of. Instead of inquiring into what it is, it explores its practical ways, that is, the conditions of its enunciation, of its unfolding, and of its felicity. In other words, this book is about truth as a phenomenon that lies open to view. Rather than looking for it in the depth of philosophy or cognitive science, it proposes to seek it where it can be seen operating before our very eyes:

Actually, Hodja, if I understand your system properly, one can never be sure that something is true or false.

Not at all, my friend, this is not what I claim.

Can you then give me an example?

The other day, I was walking in the street when I heard a passer-by telling somebody else I was dead. Well! I immediately knew it was wrong.

Truth is ubiquitous. To take but a couple of examples, we observe that, in the media, news reports and informs. In criminal prosecution, attorneys collect evidence in order to establish what happened. In archaeology, scholars look for traces as documents of the past. Within courtrooms, the judge determines the facts and characterizes them according to the law. In religious schools, pupils learn to recite the divine Truth. Scientists struggle to discover the scientific truth and blood tests reveal a person's DNA identity.

The claim of this book is that truth is a matter of language games and practical achievements. It is what we call a member phenomenon. To document this statement, we shall proceed piecemeal.

In the following chapters, we proceed to the investigation of many instances of truth-related practices in various contexts. Specifically, we explore the practice of learning God's Truth in Koran schools in Upper Egypt, the debates about the true nature of Islamic law in Arab parliaments, the search for scientific truth in the process of adjudication within courtrooms in Egypt, three Arab TV channels' self-presentations and the corollary claim they make to be the ones who tell the truth, the production of truth statements about who the terrorists are on two contrasted satellite channels, and the documentary ways to account for truth or reality disjunctions within an Algerian psychiatric hospital. We might have proposed other domains of inquiry, among which archaeology, where scientists are looking for evidence of historical truth; sports, where referees have to decide the truth of what happened on the spot; or even fiction movies, where producers organize the scenario so as to propose a

plausible, that is, a truth-oriented narrative, unless they construct the film upon the deliberate breach of truth conditions, as is the case in surrealism.

For present purposes, we just concentrate on a couple of remarks that can be made from the close observation of these settings and that turn around a threefold conviction: first, the words of truth vary from one place to another and their grammar is accessible only if taking into account the practical conditions of their utterance; second, these words depend on techniques which have been learned or inculcated; third, these words are often associated with institutions specialized in the production of truth.

If we have a look at the presentation of the news of the day on a TV channel, for instance, we can see how it is the outcome of an embedded operation of fact production. The very concept of a “production of facts” is suggestive of the manufactured character of the activity and its product. As Searle expresses it, we are confronted here with the production of an epistemic objectivity, where by “epistemic” we mean that which is the result of a subjective activity of the production of meaning, and by “objectivity” we signify that it is a question of “news” toward which viewers orient themselves as toward any factual truths. The very fact that the truth of certain televised news broadcasts becomes the subject of intense debate demonstrates that, in the absence of contradictory proof, the objective, factual character of the raw information is taken for granted by the person watching. To be sure, the interpretation of this information is often controversial; at the very least, it causes reactions, disagreements, affiliations, and disaffiliation. However, in the great majority of cases, it is not the primary factual source of the information, its denotative level, which is called into question, but simply the way of presenting it and drawing inferences from it. In other words, it is not the question of whether such an event has occurred or not that generates controversy, but the moral and normative character of its presentation, that is, its connotative level.

Focusing on Koran schooling has a purely pragmatic interest. Instead of looking for the content of truth, that is, in this case, Truth with a capital T, the Truth as revealed by God, we concentrate on the practical learning of such Truth. If truth is, among many things, an issue of learning, the description of what happens within a *kuttâb*, a Koranic school, permits to re-specify the issue of disciplining practices. Such practices may have some relationship with textual reference, yet, learning is achieved in a complex way, where the practice never fully follows formal norms nor incarnates discursive master plans. Actually, instead of looking, *à la* Foucault, for congruencies between different systems and orders, like prison, madness, school, sexuality, we engage with the detailed study of local, situated, contingent practices of different language games. Whereas a Foucault-type approach to Koranic schools would seek to achieve a diachronic archaeology of historical discourses, our own method consists instead of conducting a detailed analysis of material architectures, machineries, bodily techniques and disciplinary routines which are constitutive of the phenomenal world of a specific *kuttâb*, from within the multiplicity of practices and language games that locally take place and not in the production of any retrospective historical narrative. In this singular context, the study of one afternoon session of Koran learning precisely shows us, in this singular moment and place, how the members of the group of children and adults engaged in this activity practically orient to the practical purpose of learning the Koran, with all that can be observed in terms of attention focusing and waning, deployment of disciplinary practices and emotions, performance of gestures and techniques, types of knowledge and mistakes.

Exploring the law and, in particular, adjudication in criminal cases is another attempt at describing the practical functioning of human reasoning oriented toward the establishment of truth. Focusing on causal concepts as actually used in specific settings constitutes, therefore,

one way to engage in the inquiry into the practical grammar of truth in a legal context. For that purpose, analysis must focus upon causal reasoning as a kind of social praxis in its own right. Causal reasoning is a public phenomenon mainly directed at establishing a relationship between an “action” and its “author,” and the nature of such relationship. Thus, the description of an action and the characterization of its causes as deliberate, hazardous, accidental, fortunate, negligent, and the like, have direct and major consequences in terms of responsibility ascription. It is always necessary to resituate the practical, contextual and situated dimension of causal reasoning and the production of truth to which it is geared. Legal and commonsense reasoning is practically and contextually articulated on notions like cause, reason, motive, intention, excuse, justification or circumstances, all notions toward which people orient all along the judicial sequence. These orientations are articulated on underlying schemes of normality and naturalness from which multiple inferences are drawn, and they are closely dependent on their positioning in the judicial sequence and on the interactional tasks they seek to achieve.

Such a varied set of questions, bearing on the constitution of actions and events, on what is factual or objective, on predictability, consequentiality, intentionality, causality, and on the many ways people orient to them, such a varied set of questions appears thoroughly moral. The praxeological respecification we undertake in this book leads to important considerations regarding the question of morality in ordinary reasoning, and the categories and categorizations on which that morality is based. First, moral values are publicly available, in the sense that they do not reside in some secret place of the mind or subjective perception; rather, they are given, made visible, laid out, and imputed on the basis of people’s discourses and actions. Second, morality has a modal logic, which means that, even if one had general principles, conventions, and rules, these would not provide their own applications in advance for different action contexts; even if they are given conventionally, they must be explained situationally. Third, moral values and conventions have an open texture: their uses and applications are determined by multiple criteria, which is not evidence of disorder, but rather the indication of a practical order made up of multiple options, which are constantly being realized, contradicted, made relevant, or transformed. Fourth, objectivity is a practical achievement carried out by members of society. This does not mean that it is relative, but rather that it emerges from a shared world, in which the dimension everyone shares is at one and the same time presumed and discovered. Finally, fifth, the moral order is an omnipresent, constitutive characteristic of social practice; it is always available both as a resource and a topic of investigation, as a foundation and a project; it is not a locus of investigation restricted to moral philosophers alone. As Heritage (1984) emphasizes, “the normative accountability of action is thus a seamless web, an endless metric in terms of which conduct is unavoidably intelligible, describable and assessable.”

To close this introduction, we can turn back to Nasr Eddin:

Nasr Eddin is walking on a long dirt road; he is most hungry. He meets a man, who is bearded, wears rags, seems haggard, and walks looking in the sky.

He is probably one of these rambling dervishes, one of these fools of God, who wander around the country in endless prayer. His admiration notwithstanding, Nasr Eddin sees that the man has a loaf of bread under his arm.

Our Hodja takes his stand firmly in the middle of the road and greets him in these terms:

- Hello, ye slave of God, ye rambling prophet!

But the other bluntly cuts in and shouts, his eyes red of fatigue or heavenly visions:

- I’m not the slave of God, I’m not a rambling prophet!

- I beg your pardon, ye saint dervish...

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- *I'm not a saint dervish, says the fool, as vehemently as ever.*
 - *Indeed, indeed, yet, you're a believer, as am I, and among believers...*
 - *I'm not like you, I'm not a believer! Who I am, I shall tell you...*
- But Nasr Eddin cuts him short:*
- *Oh! No, no! Please, don't! Because you will show me right after, that what you have under your arm is not what it looks like, that it is not a loaf of bread.*

Obviously, Nasr Eddin has a very pragmatic conception of truth, one which is deeply grounded in commonsense, one which can clearly delineate between sense and non-sense.

In a somehow more refined way, Wittgenstein is also calling for the delineation of the border between sense and nonsense. This is not a purely empirical matter, as it is not what comes from actual cases that will tell us all what potentially can or cannot make sense. Empiricism has no explicating power. However, closely describing actual cases in which the production of truth is at stake, participates in the writing of that practical grammar which itself draws the map of sense and nonsense. Engaging in the exploration of such practical grammar as it enfolds in context is therefore worth the journey, even though this is a journey which has a start but no end.

