

A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY  
INTO NASREDDIN HODJA STORIES



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A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY INTO NASREDDIN HODJA STORIES

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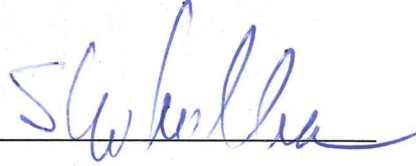
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A Philosophical Inquiry Into Nasreddin Hodja Stories

The thesis of Gizem Tıđlı

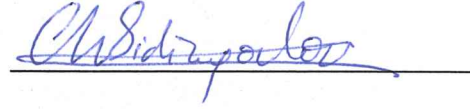
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May 2019

## DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Gizem Tıđlı, certify that

- I am the sole author of this thesis and that I have fully acknowledged and documented in my thesis all sources of ideas and words, including digital resources, which have been produced or published by another person or institution;
- this thesis contains no material that has been submitted or accepted for a degree or diploma in any other educational institution;
- this is a true copy of the thesis approved by my advisor and thesis committee at Bođaziçi University, including final revisions required by them.

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## ABSTRACT

### A Philosophical Inquiry Into Nasreddin Hodja Stories

Overall, this thesis is about Nasreddin Hodja's stories. Selected stories from a trustworthy source in Anatolian Turkish are used and then translated into English with the effort of keeping the essence of the actual story. These stories include philosophical utterances on which my inquiry is based with the aim of revealing them. The commentaries and the philosophical discussions in this paper are based on my personal investigation. Philosophical issues are not explicitly mentioned in the stories and therefore my aim is to reveal the hidden messages kept within them.

## ÖZET

### Nasrettin Hoca Fıkralarına Felsefi Bir Sorgulama

Bu tez geneli itibarı ile Nasreddin Hoca fıkraları ile ilgilidir. Fıkralar Anadolu Türkçesi'nde güvenilir bir kaynaktan seçilerek, kullanılmış, İngilizceye gerçek fıkraların özünü koruma çabası gösterilerek çevrilmiştir. Seçilen fıkralar bu sorgulamada içlerindeki felsefi ifadeleri ortaya dökmüştür. Bu tezdeki yorumlar ve felsefi tartışmalar kişisel araştırmama dayanmaktadır. Fıkralardaki felsefi meseleler açıkça belirtilmediğinden, amacım içlerindeki gizli mesajları görünür kılmaktır.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Nasreddin Hodja has been known for his unique humor in Turkish culture for approximately 800 years. He is among the forefathers of the Turkish folklore, his name going hand in hand with the “fikra” tradition. “Fıkra” could be translated into English as “witty short stories or tales”, but this term does not reflect the entire meaning of “fikra”. In Turkish literature, fikra is a specific form of storytelling, which makes one laugh, while at the same time making one pause to think.

According to Türk Dil Kurumu<sup>1</sup>, “fikra” (2006) is a little piece of literature, which has a concise narrative form with its witty style. Fıkra<sup>2</sup> is generally part of the oral culture. While being part of the tradition, fikra also encourages philosophical discussion. In this sense, Nasreddin Hodja is one of the main figures of this traditional Turkish literature genre.

Hodja’s stories are mainly centered on humor; however, stories might go in different directions due to Hodja’s witticisms. Thus, there might be many ways to read his stories. Most of the stories are posited in order to reflect the faults or the naivety of the society, and thus to make people think. In this regard, he might represent the fusion of humor and wisdom, and thus, he can be claimed to be a trickster. Some of the stories correspond to some philosophical matters of his era. Also, there are many which are told solely for the purpose of making people laugh. All of these can be intertwined in some stories as well. Therefore, he is both satirical

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<sup>1</sup> Türk Dil Kurumu: Turkish Language Institute, the conventional, state-funded authority of Turkish Language.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the paper, I will use the term story and fikra interchangeably.

and didactical, but this does not mean that all of the stories have the purpose of being didactical.

My inquiry will be on the ones in which there could be some crumbs of philosophy. Since philosophical issues have been absorbed into the ordinary language by Hodja's wisdom, it is not easy to detect them. One other thing, which makes it difficult to detect the philosophy, is his method of dialectics in the sense that he is asking questions to the audience in order to make them contemplate upon specific issues or to realize the answer (if there is any) themselves. Therefore, he does not put forward what he wants to say directly, and thus one should think deeply in order to grasp the hidden message within the stories.

I will try to communicate Hodja by using his stories and eventually hope to grasp the underlying philosophical issues that Hodja wants people to pick up themselves. Taking this into consideration, it could be said that the inquiry will be based mainly on my personal investigation and contemplation into the stories.

Hodja, before anything else, is a wise sage and thus his philosophical utterance is not merely theoretical, but particularly practical. This does not mean that his philosophy is not based in theory, but instead he takes concrete matters and examples as his starting point and evaluates from there on. And the concrete matters he begins with are related to the society's everyday concerns. In other words, his philosophical points do not indicate merely to a theory, but to practicality. As a storyteller, he incorporates philosophical conventions that are in his opinion crucial for his time and place. One of the reasons why he did start with practical examples might be that Hodja is interested in real life, meaning that if he says something, it should somehow touch or affect life itself. Otherwise, it remains as a cloud in the mind. It could be claimed that his understanding of philosophy supports the idea that

philosophy and the practical life are intertwined with each other, not otherwise. If he were alive, he could argue against the mere theoretical philosophy, which does not carry the purpose of touching practical matters.

It is not known who Nasreddin Hodja really is, whether he symbolizes the society of Sivrihisar, a province of present day Turkey near Konya, or a single human being: though some scholars doubt that his character is a real-historical person. Also, some claim that not all of the stories are attached to him. Therefore, it is a widely accepted idea that more than one person might have created the stories. Since fikra is part of oral tradition, written forms come always after its utterance. This leads one to take two important processes into consideration namely: creating and passing them over. Consequently, this in return results in discrepancy with the actual fikra depending on who is passing the stories in written form.

It is not known whether Hodja takes any part in passing stories. His disciples or people who have heard these stories might have had the purpose of keeping record and thus helped passing them over. Even nowadays, people are creating new stories using the name of Nasreddin Hodja, though it is easier to differentiate the newer ones from the older versions. The reason is that newer ones are written in the form of present day language and could reflect all sorts of discourses. Most of them are put forward for touristic reasons, in order to grab tourists' attention to Nasreddin Hodja. And one could detect them by investigating the use of language.

On the other hand, the language in the old manuscripts is in Old Anatolian Turkish, and therefore one should engage in exhaustive analysis in order to understand them. Also, since we have great amount of stories in manuscripts forms, it is a very difficult job to differentiate whether actually Hodja himself is the source of a particular story or not. It might be the case that the person, who has passed it on

to writing, could have created some of them. Or it could be some other Nasreddin Hodja figure.

Taking into consideration of what has been mentioned above, it might be said that one cannot be fully certain whether Nasreddin Hodja himself has created some or all of the stories. Some even claim that he was not a real-historical figure, that there was not such a person on earth at all. So, the only thing we could be clearly certain of is the existence of these stories and that they claim their creator is a person called Nasreddin Hodja –leaving aside the arguments if the name, Nasreddin Hodja, refers to a single specific human being or to a bunch of different human beings.

Moreover, as is the case, when one passes something on in writing, it is very likely to lose some of its meaning. I think all of these issues are and will always be controversial, and therefore it is almost impossible to have a definite conclusion. All of this requires another direction of investigation and thus is beyond the concern of this paper, but I will try to give brief information about Hodja's life and connections to the stories in the following chapter.

Despite the fact that one can come across Nasreddin Hodja stories in different cultures, it could be said that these stories represent Turkish culture. These stories are clues in order to gather information about Hodja's and his contemporary society's lifestyle. This will be the basis of my inquiry, since his philosophy and the lifestyle go hand in hand in the stories. By criticizing the society, one reaches both the knowledge of its social structure and underlying philosophy that Hodja himself criticizes. In other words, if one wants to understand philosophy underlying the stories, one should also contemplate upon the narrative. The fiction might be a clue in order to understand Hodja's community and related problems that could also be philosophical.

Furthermore, “philosophy within the stories” shows us that he is not religious, but spiritual –not religious, in the sense that he is not a believer of the dogma. Yet, after all, he is a Hodja, a teacher of Islam. Even though the term “Hodja” represents religious authority in Islam, at the same time, it could be easily claimed that he is not an orthodox Hodja, but a representative of the heretic ideas that employ very refined critical thinking and humor. Nasreddin Hodja is spiritual in the sense that he believes in religion, but not in the conservative and dogmatic sense. I can say that he represents a modal of spirituality in relation to the religion. In other words, Hodja’s image demonstrates how to be a real religious person. This paper will deal with this image extensively: By investigating these stories, I will try to come up with an understanding of religion that he, Nasreddin Hodja, claims to be true. Philosophy of religion, as well as epistemological and ethical issues will be on the forefront of my inquiry.

In order to achieve my aim accurately, I will use Pertev Naili Boratav’s compilation of Nasreddin Hodja stories: *Nasreddin Hoca* (2007). Along with his essays on Nasreddin Hoca, Boratav in this book gathers 584 stories from the original and veritable resources. From the perspective of Nasreddin Hodja studies and studies on his stories, it is essential to employ veritable and historical references: There are references, albeit claiming to be reproductions, that modify or alter the essence of the stories in order to benefit from Nasreddin Hoca fame. Boratav’s book is acclaimed since it gathers trustworthy manuscripts from world-wide libraries, namely: Oxford Bodleian Library, Paris Bibliotheque Nationale, Ankara Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Kitaplığı, Berlin National Library etc.

Translation was a crucial step in this study due to the fact that the stories were written in Old Anatolian Turkish, and it is not easy, even for a native speaker, to

translate them. The stories in Boratav's book *Nasreddin Hoca* (2007), transcribed and transliterated from Old Anatolian Turkish, creates difficulties in deciphering the philosophical meaning due to the historical distance –that is, throughout the centuries Turkish language has changed considerably. So, a contemporary Turkish speaker must exert a lot of effort in terms of translation of the original manuscripts. To overcome this difficulty, I made use of various dictionaries and tried to come up with a consistent translation with the actual writings. Therefore, from among those 584 stories, I selected the ones that were involved with philosophical issues in some way or other; and thereafter, I translated them into English and delved into philosophical inquiry.

Let me begin with a very brief history of Nasreddin Hodja's life. Even though there is no consensus about its details, it is beneficial to summarize views in order to understand better his social background.

## CHAPTER 2

### NASREDDIN HODJA AND HIS PATH

First of all, Nasreddin Hodja is a well-known figure not only in Turkey, but also in different parts of the world. His fame has expanded in Turkish speaking territories under the Ottoman Empire and thereafter almost all over the world. Nowadays, Hodja is widely known throughout Europe and Africa.

It is worth mentioning that there is not enough evidence to recount Hodja's life precisely, and therefore I can merely transfer the scholars' claims, produced as a result of their extensive studies on historical texts and manuscripts. In other words, the following are but inferences from these sources.

According to the tradition, it is said that Hodja was born in Sivrihisar's Horto village. The exact date and the place of his birth and death are not known. Authorities claim that he might have been born around 1208/9. It is claimed that he has lived until his 80s (until around 1284), and that he might have died in another village called Akşehir.

On the other hand, one should not neglect that some scholars are skeptical whether or not Nasreddin Hodja is a real-historical figure. In other words, what they propose is that there is a possibility that these stories might not reflect what he has lived through. Instead, they tend to think of Nasreddin Hodja as an imaginary figure and that the stories might refer to a fictional character. Renné Basset, the French thinker who takes the lead of this approach, strongly argues that Hodja is not a real historical figure (Sakaoğlu & Alptekin, 2014, p.27). Conversely, Pertev Naili Boratav (2007), Saim Sakaoğlu and Ali Berat Alptekin (2014), the scholars who have dedicated their lives to Nasreddin Hodja studies, consider him as a real-

historical figure and proceed from there. This takes another direction of research and has its own corpus, and thus, it is beyond this paper's concern. Taking account of this fact, I will try to assume Hodja as a real-historical figure, and attempt to shed light upon the life of this character employed in the stories.

So, leaving aside the argument that he is a fictional character, it is said that he was a medresseh teacher. Medresseh is an Islamic theological school attached to a mosque, and that is why he is called Hodja. "Hodja" is a title attached to the religious teachers in Islam. A hodja is a teacher in the Islamic culture. This could also be justified by analyzing his stories, a primary example being the story accounted in this study that involves Kayqubad: in this story, he is the go-to figure to prove the worth of Islam and its cultural heritage. As reflected from this particular example, some of his stories have deep and subtle philosophical background and address religion directly. As such, one could say that one should hold a certain religious and philosophical education in order to utter those stories as such –or even if one takes the opposing view on the historical existence of Nasreddin Hodja, the utterances in these stories reflect a certain religious and philosophical education.

According to folk history, Hodja's father was an imam, who could be considered as Islamic clergy caste. "Imam" is a religious figure who dedicates his life to Islam and works in a mosque. Thus, it could be said that Hodja's knowledge of Islam might have also come from his father. There is also a widely accepted account of Hodja that he was an imam of Akşehir for a period of time, and the basis of truth for this claim lies in the fact that in most of the stories, Hodja is represented as an imam. Likewise, the set of stories used in this thesis recount his witty exchanges with his Jemaah. Also, as mentioned, his title, Hodja itself, is also used for imams, sometimes these two being exchangeable.



Sivrihisar, the town where he is claimed to have been born, has become famous through the years just like Nasreddin Hodja. It could be argued that the characteristics of Hodja might have been somehow transferred to the people of Sivrihisar or vice versa. The people of Sivrihisar, “Sivrihisarlılar”, have been considered as “bizarre, sharp-witted and naïve” people bearing the characteristics attributed to Hodja (Boratav, *Nasreddin Hoca*, 2007, p. 25). This points to a question of whether Sivrihisarlılar are famous due to Hodja or Hodja is claimed to be born there since Sivrihisarlılar have those characteristics mentioned above.

This is a question raised by Naili Boratav in his book (2007, p, 26). He imprecisely concludes that the people of Sivrihisar are well known by these characteristics due to Hodja’s reputation. The reason Boratav mentions this is that the stories that come by written tradition are diminished when one goes back in time and this in return leads one to believe that the anonymous stories might have been attributed to him. Since the stories are transferred by oral tradition, it is expected that the number of stories do not multiply by time. Moreover, Boratav claims that the people who could have analogous peculiarities might have been taken into consideration as Nasreddin Hodja (2007, p.27). Therefore, Boratav supports more of the idea that the consideration of the people of Sivrihisar as such is due to Hodja’s peculiar personality, rather than the other way around.

By taking account of Boratav’s claims, it could be said that not all the stories attributed to Nasreddin Hodja belong to him, but also to people of Sivrihisar and this poses a difficulty to differentiate the stories from one another. However, I will not deal with this problematic fact in this paper. However, some of those “other” Nasreddin Hodjas are worth mentioning. Professor Sakaoğlu mentions 8 of them as follows: Nasreddin Hodja from Akşehir, Nasreddin Hodja from Kayseri, Nasreddin

Hodja from Kastamonu, Ahi Evren Şeyh Nasiruddin Mahmud, Nasruddin Tusi from Azerbaijan, Nasreddin Hodja from Bukhara, Nasreddin Hodja from Esfahan (*Nasreddin Hoca Üzerine Yazılar*, 2013, p, 18). The last one is the Nasreddin Hodja from Sivrihisar; the traditional approach takes this last one as the Nasreddin Hodja figure. Pertev Naili Boratav tends to consider Hodja as if he is from Sivrihisar as well.

As mentioned, we are faced with multiple Nasreddin Hodjas and it is beyond this paper's concern to try to discern which story belongs to the "real" Hodja. Therefore, I will not get into this issue, and mention "Nasreddin Hodja" and "his stories" throughout this paper by knowing that what these terms refer to is not accurate. Furthermore, some scholars claim that these researches with the quest for the real Nasreddin Hodja and his real stories fail to a certain extent. One of these scholars, David Sayers, puts forth an important argument at this point. He says that determining which story belongs to the real Nasreddin Hodja only results in ideological preferences to be brought into daylight ("Nasreddin Hoca," 2007, p, 675). If I may paraphrase and comment upon his words, I would say that he thinks that it is not needed to seek the real stories, since the researcher's luggage of ideas might affect the process, and therefore leads nowhere other than showing researcher's ideology. For example, one might find some stories immoral and claim that they do not belong to real Hodja. This points to that specific scholar's belief in the image of Hodja as an orthodox religious person. However, it will be shown in this paper that this does not go hand in hand with the image of Hodja depicted in the stories.

Hodja is a heterodox and spiritual person, while at the same time he is a wise sage. This issue will be discussed both below and in Chapter 2.

According to the authorities, the oldest information about Hodja's real-historical figure is presented in the manuscript of *Saltukname* by Ebu'l Hayr-ı Rumi, which was written in 1480. There one can find a little story of Hodja: Sakaoğlu and Alptekin put forward the story in their book (*Nasreddin Hoca*, 2014, p.35). To briefly summarize the story, its beginning would suffice:

One day Hodja encounters Sarı Saltuk and invites him to his place. Saltuk asks him whether the place belongs to Hodja or not. Hodja answers him that there are only three things belonging to him, and the rest is not his. These things cannot be separated from him day and night. And once it is asked what those things are, Hodja responds that these are his balls and cock. (...)

From this little piece mentioned above, one could get the gist of Hodja's understanding of humor and his personality. He is an extraordinary sage in the sense that he does not care at all about the taboos and the conservatism around him. Instead, he points them out. He expresses sexuality loudly and thus gives it a voice. This is a crucial point, because one could argue that it is a part of his ethics. One could say that he tries to normalize sexuality, meaning to consider it as a daily matter like washing the dishes, not a taboo. Thanks to his wit, he achieves this wisely. In the following chapter, when I analyze the stories, this issue will be discussed deeply.

Sakaoğlu and Alptekin (*Nasreddin Hoca*, 2014) criticize some writers' approach towards the stories. It is a common phenomenon that some writers find the stories obscene, and therefore take some parts out of it or change it in a way that it is not anymore "obscene". Sakaoğlu and Alptekin, have given an example, regarding the story mentioned above. Instead of mentioning the three things explicitly, s/he puts "... " in place of those three things which s/he finds vulgar (2014, p.26). Apparently, s/he did not want to mention "balls and the cock". They do not give this writer's name.

Enis Batur writes explicitly in the preface of Boratav's book of gathered manuscripts ("Boratav'in 'Opus Magnum'u: Bir Kültür Anıtı", 2007, p. 7-8) that Hodja and the culture he brings has been rejected and denied through the centuries and thus Boratav is one of researchers who really digs into "real" Hodja instead of covering him up with his words. In Batur's words, Boratav brought the undesirable Hodja to the forefront ("İki Hoca Arasından", 2007, p.10).

Hodja is criticized and thus denied by Turkish intellectuals, because of his use of language and his persistent motifs. It is believed by some authorities that these things harm the fact that he is a sage. This reveals an underlying argument that a sage should have an elitist and conservative use of language, but is this really true? Should a sage be in conformity with the common people's way of behaving or vice versa?

As mentioned, Turkish intellectuals deny real Hodja and instead they want to create their own, "moral" Hodja. In this regard, Kaya Erginer and İsmail Hâmi Danişmend, two of those types of intellectuals, tend to ignore the real Hodja. For example, they do not want to remember Hodja with his donkey. As is known, most of the stories include conversations between Hodja and his donkey. In this regard, Erginer and Danişmend do not like Hodja and his relation with his donkey (Boratav, *Nasreddin Hoca*, 2007, p. 30-31). This is because according to these figures, the connection between Hodja and his donkey lowers the status of his being a wise sage. It is believed that, by those conservative people, "donkey", as an animal, does not go hand in hand with an imam. Boratav strongly argues against this idea and in his view, the image of a donkey does not imply such connotations. Instead, he argues that donkey is an important figure as it is his friend; while at the same the donkey is also the actual star in some of the stories (*Nasreddin Hoca*, 2007, p. 31).

In order to conclude, it is worth mentioning once again why I use Boratav's book as a main source book for the concern of the paper. All in all, it is claimed by him that he did not go into sterilization or purification of the stories, thus asserting that he portrays them as they are. This is a crucial point because in order to understand Hodja truly, we should get into contact with the original stories, not otherwise. The attributes of being irreligious and perverseness of Hodja by some conservative scholars cause them to eliminate what they do not like in the stories and therefore could lead one to a false understanding (Boratav, *Nasreddin Hoca*, 2007, p. 46).

## CHAPTER 3

### INQUIRY INTO STORIES

In this chapter, I will offer the translation of some of the stories that I find philosophical and then contemplate upon them. In other words, I will try to discover the messages that are intelligently kept covered. As mentioned, I will try to remain loyal to Hodja's use of language and where necessary, apply historical distance to the translated stories in English. I hope my translations are analogous as much as possible to the actual stories.

Let me begin with a story dealing mainly with "death". It is a good example of a story that can be interpreted at multiple layers. At first, it might seem a simple story just to make people laugh, but once you dig into it, one can have the chance of connecting with the philosophical issues dealt within the story (Boratav, 2007, p. 110).

It's told that one day, sitting at a graveyard, Hodja Nasiruddin took off his shirt<sup>3</sup>, and butt-naked, to get rid of his shame, began picking up the fleas over his body. Meanwhile, a strong breeze blew and stole the Hodja's shirt off from his hands. And the Hodja began chasing it, shouting "Over here! Over there...!" By fits and starts, stumbling over the gravestones and picking himself up again, he ran behind the flying shirt. To their surprise, a few fellow travelers, determined to take care of their business were by the road to the graveyard. And there, they saw a fellow, butt-naked, and stumbling up and down amongst the headstones, running over here and falling over there, and once in a while, sitting and taking a breath. These travelers came forward and asked: "Hey, you over there, who the hell are you? And what business do you have over there?" The Hodja replied: "Who can I be? I am, but one of the deceased, with urgent need to defecate and cleanse, since I am yet uncleansed properly prior to my burial. Fellow travelers, I have to take care of my business as well." [5]<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The word "shirt" is used here to mean long, dress-length garment. I think Hodja was wearing an "ihram" which is similar to a long shirt covering the whole body. Once one takes it off, one remains naked.

<sup>4</sup> I will use the numbers that Boratav (*Nasreddin Hoca*, 2007) uses in his book as well, so as to link easily the stories with the Old Turkish versions in his book. I will put them right after each story in brackets.

This story reveals us a hint of how Hodja does not take life so seriously. He does not care what people think of him. In this sense, he goes here and there naked, thus in the eyes of “others”, he acts unpredictably for an adult. When they ask what he is doing, he says that he is one of the deceased. This might refer to a philosophical concept that is dying before dying, which appears in the Prophetic Tradition of Islam and Islamic Mysticism (“Sufism”) as “die before ye die”. If interpreted as such: he is so much aware of the fact that eventually one will die, and by recognizing this fact, he behaves according to this truth. It could be easily claimed that there is only one thing in life we are certain of: that is, one day one will die. Therefore, Hodja, by taking this truth into account, does not give so much importance to life and implicitly advises one to do the same. The advice is not an easy one to take since it requires courage. To be courageous against the society’s norms is very difficult, but as the image of Hodja in the story depicts, it is not impossible. This will be dealt in the further paragraphs. He points out an ethical issue as well as a theme in philosophy of religion.

The concept of dying before dying could be understood as a step in spiritual achievement. I might have used the term achievement, yet it is not something to be achieved: instead, it is more likely that one experiences this state of consciousness by giving up things, and then one could experience it spontaneously, not through willful desire. First defining the experience of dying before dying as a category of the state of consciousness, it might be that one can reach higher spirituality only by approaching this state of consciousness. And in order for it to happen, like it does for Hodja, one should give up societal bondages that one acts upon. One should get rid of emotions arisen from fear and desire in order to attain that state. This is the case, since emotions that arise from fear and desire leads one to be attached to the world of

phenomena. By the world of phenomena, I mean the empirical realm that one is exposed to. Social bondages, fear and desire, do not lead to freedom or spiritual achievement, let me say, but to the ignorance. The meaning of ignorance is not as it is in common usage pertaining to the state of not being educated, but it refers to something else: one is ignorant if she is attached to world of phenomena. What makes one ignorant is the attachment to the outside world, rather than being released from it. In that sense, Hodja portrays an example of such a person. He is fearless and has no desire to pursue his life as is expected from him.

It could be said that one should overcome social bondage, fear and desire and then one could reach freedom. Herewith the term “freedom” is used as the antonym to the term “ignorance”. One is free if she has released the attachment to world of phenomena. I do not mean or refer to any political or ethical discussion of the term “freedom” here, but instead, more or less, to its meaning in religion and spirituality. Although other discussions mentioned are out of context of this text, it is worth emphasizing the difference.

As mentioned, Hodja is very comfortable in going naked, and this could be because he does not care about society’s norms. Thus, in order to reach the goal of spiritual achievement, one should contemplate upon her actions to understand whether she does what she does for the sake of conforming with the morality or with the norms of the society. Contemplation or reflection upon oneself could lead one to achieve freedom –the spiritual achievement as it has been explained before. Hodja, as a critical thinker, could have reflected upon himself, and as such, the stories are the outcome of his contemplation.

Moreover, it could be said that this is also about contrasts: meaning how one deals with the opposites in life. While Hodja is trying to find his shirt by being



naked, he says that he is doing something important. Here we are faced with the opposites: he is very aware that he does not pursue something important, but he acts as if he is. He is seeking his shirt, but not seriously; he is doing what is required for life without being attached to it. It might be claimed that he is in-between. This is also related with the concept of dying before dying. He lives as if he does not live. He tries to find his shirt while not caring too much about it. While this might sound controversial, if one intellectualizes the concept of being in-between, one will definitely fall into the fallacy of logic. However, this cannot be understood by intellect, but by feeling it. Living and not living are the negation of each other and cannot coexist in consistent logic. However, what Hodja is trying to mention is the feeling of in-betweenness.

It is through the body that one should act as Hodja describes, not with the mind. This is also linked to what is to be like a child. Kids, before coming to a certain age, act from their feelings, not with their minds, and therefore Hodja is like a child in this sense. He stumbles up and down in the graveyard. He does not care about other people; in this story, the travelers are the ones posing questions to him. He easily makes up an explanation, which does not explain his behaviors in the eyes of travellers, but reveals some deep philosophical issues once one takes the whole story into account. It could be said that Hodja has overcome his society's norms and in that sense he is free. Social bondage is one thing that makes you attached to the world of phenomena and since Hodja is not interested in those bondages, it could be said that he is free. He does not need to follow the norms; instead he can act however he feels. He is also in-between in this sense. He is aware of the requirements of the society, but since he is not attached to them, he acts freely and spontaneously. By spontaneously, I mean to act according to necessities of the moment.

Furthermore, it is also worth mentioning the heretic approach of Hodja in this story. As mentioned, he is neither a conservative nor an orthodox person, instead he lives in the extremes. He does not obey the rules of morality of the society in which he lives. He is an adult, but one whose driving force comes from within, not from society. In that sense, he is like a child. As mentioned, before coming to a certain age, kids also act spontaneously until adults start to load them with their beliefs and fears. Living in extremes also means that he is on the edge. He neither fears nor cares about what others make of him. In other words, if he does something, he does it fully. He is seeking for his shirt “butt-naked” and does not consider the people around him. A conservative person would not do the same; she would act according to social rules and norms. On the contrary, Hodja, being not interested in social bondages, seems like he has overcome them. Therefore, one might infer from there that a sage is one who has understood the restrictions of social rules and norms, and thus who is one who acts free from them. There one could find the criticism of orthodox religious people: one should not depend on the societal norms for the sake of being “religious”, rather a real sage should not feel these restrictions on her shoulders and thus act spontaneously. In this sense, Hodja is a spiritual being rather than religious, since his understanding of being religious is far different than the society’s. Therefore, it can be said that Hodja touches upon matters both in ethics and in philosophy of religion in these lines.

In other words, Hodja is a heterodox person who is beyond norms and restrictions that society or religion imposes as a scheme to follow; instead he is free of them. He is acting through the necessities of the moment, which I shall refer to as a spontaneous act. He is not following an order or a higher authority, rather he is running around, being here and there, as he feels, and thus acts (not reacts) according

to what it is required of that moment. This is a crucial point since this rules out acting out of dogma. If he were to behave under dogmas, he would not stumble up here and there naked; it could be said instead he would be at home, obeying and practicing rules of a religion that imposes these seemingly unchanging rules. Therefore, it is worth saying that his understanding of Truth is elastic and fluid. I use these adjectives in order to show how he takes the religion itself: not as a dogma, but rather a guideline, which could be changed and interpreted according to the needs of the moment.

What is mentioned previously (“how to be a sage”) contrasts with the general image of a religious person in Hodja’s society. Being conservative, believing in dogma is the norm of being a religious person in Hodja’s time, and Hodja strongly argues against it as explained above. He is courageous in the sense that he has overcome his society’s understanding of a religious person; he is free from them. He is heretic and rather spiritual in this sense.

In the following fikra, one could find a great example of Hodja’s story in which ethics, ontology and philosophy of religion are intertwined with each other in a very short paragraph. It shows both Hodja’s intelligence and how he sees the phenomena as one unit. By being one unit, I refer to the holistic approach Hodja has towards certain issues and towards the world itself (Boratav, 2007, p. 111):

One day, Hodja Nasiruddin climbed up the minbar, and began his sermon as thus: “Oh Muslims! Glory be and praise to Allah, for not giving wings to camels, since having wings, they would have perched on your chimneys and reduced them to rubble.” And thus, he ended his sermon. [8]

Even though at first it might not seem as such, this story is basically about ontology. The common reader might take it literally and consider it mere humor, once one goes deeper, this story might have subtler meanings. Here, Hodja deals with a theory of

ontology: He says that if camel has wings, but thank God they do not, they would ruin the chimneys. From this argument, one could say that camel is as such, and there is a reason for camel to be as such. If one takes this as a premise and implements it for all the creatures, she can end up with the argument that all creatures are as they are and there is a reason for them to be as such. Putting aside the problems of induction, one could say that Hodja brings forward an ontological argument.

Taking into account what is mentioned above, it could be claimed that each creature has its way of being and thus a reason for it to be as it is. This is an ontological utterance: like a camel not having wings by nature, birds having wings has to do with their nature as well. Furthermore, Hodja tries to put another philosophical utterance on top of all these, and says that it is God who did not give wings to camels. Taking this premise for all the creatures, one can conclude that God is the creator of all creatures and it is God who sets up the nature of all creatures. In other words, ontology of creatures is dependent on God, and the reasons of being such and such can be found in God. So, what Hodja tries to claim by this story is both related to ontology and philosophy of religion.

Moreover, when one inquires deeper in this story, one could get subtler issues related to its philosophy. By proposing ontological arguments and putting God in these, Hodja might be wanting to say something about ethics as well. By saying praise God for not giving wings to camels, Hodja could be pointing at something else: from the concrete example of camel, there can be thus induced the same claim for all creatures. And then camels can be substituted with humans. The negative property, "Not having wings" will be changed according to each creature. For example, we can say that humans think. Humans are as such by the property of

thinking. Therefore, the premise could be like to praise God for giving humans the ability of thinking.

Furthermore, if one contemplates upon such argument, she can end up with ethics as well. There is a reason given by God for every creature to have such and such peculiar characteristics. This was explained in the previous paragraph, but one can go further and say that Hodja tries to make one grateful for what one possesses and does not possess. In general terms, this premise could be as follows: praise God for what you have not, and thus what you have. What you have and what you have not are two sides of the same coin, in other words, they are both related to the nature of creatures. Therefore, if I were supposed to paraphrase Hodja, I would do it as follows: Be happy for what you have and do not be sad for what you have not. Here, we are in the high point of Hodja's ethical understanding: he might be claiming that if one desires something beyond her abilities, she is on the wrong path. What she already has is also very precious. The thing one does not see is that what she has not might ruin something in the world's order, like the camel having wings might ruin the chimneys. Analogy made here might sound awkward and funny, but Hodja with his intelligent perception of humor might try to point out these things that are not easily grasped on the surface level. Overall, Hodja tries to say that people should not complain about the nature of things, and furthermore, be grateful for what they already have as their nature. It could be said that by extreme or absurd concrete example of camels, Hodja is pointing out something else. His main purpose is not to praise God for camels not being as such, but the other following arguments.

Thus, it can be claimed that Hodja is a logic master in this sense. He knows how to use logic in order to prove his arguments. In this story, it can be claimed that he is engaging in a form of argument called *reductio ad absurdum*. In this story's

case, it means that in order to prove one's argument, one appeals to extreme examples. The camel example is an extreme example in order to prove or show what I have argued above.

As mentioned, ontology, ethics and philosophy of religion are put together in this story and they are all connected to one another. This could be claimed as Hodja's holistic approach towards phenomena. In this sense, Hodja does not construct a theoretical scheme of ontology, ethics and philosophy of religion, meaning that his philosophy is not axiomatic, it is rather poetic. One should think and dig in order to reveal the hidden theory. His message could be his theory. To get the gist of this story, one should contemplate. He does not want to say something about camels, but he is using the tangible example of camels in order to point out something else. And his use of such a concrete example makes it easier for the mind to grasp the theory. As mentioned in the previous chapter of this thesis, Hodja is interested more in practicality than theory. Though, his starting point is always concrete matters, he builds his theory based upon them.

It is worth mentioning that the next four stories will be interpreted as a continuation of each other. Even though they are separate, it seems like each one is the continuation of the former one.

The next story that I will try to contemplate upon is about epistemology. He is teasing people listening to him, and by doing so he might be referring to philosophical discussion about knowledge and the issues around this subject. Once again, we are faced with a short story having deeper philosophical issues that the philosophers are pondering upon throughout centuries. Here is the story (Boratav, 2007, p. 112):

One day, Hodja Nasiruddin began his sermon thus: “Oh Muslims! Do you know what I will preach unto you?” And the mass replied, “No, we do not.” And the Hodja told them: “Since you do not know, why should I bother telling you?” Having said so, he climbed down the minbar and went away. [11]

Hodja puzzles the congregation by pointing out the fact that if they do not know what he is going to tell them, why would they be there to listen to him. By simple logic, Hodja sounds legitimate. If one does not know what she will know, what does she want to know? In other words, the story reveals a hint of philosophical discussion of whether knowledge could be known or not. The underlying philosophical issue is as follows: How does one desire to know X that she does not know? And related to that, but further is it possible to attain the knowledge?

It seems that Hodja wants people to think about this subject because after asking the questions, he just goes away. Actually, this is his style of teaching. He never gives the answer directly; instead he confuses people by humorous approach as long as they are able to get his gist. He wants people to find out the answers. Sometimes there might not be answers for his questions either. In a sense, he wants people solely to think and thus to contemplate upon philosophical matters touching their daily life. In this sense, Hodja is making the mass ponder why they are going to mosque and what they want to know. Also, on the other hand, he perplexes them with his philosophical inquiry. He tries to make the congregation to think about the nature of knowledge.

Let me continue with the next story associated with the previous one. It seems like it is the continuation of the previous story (Boratav, 2007, p. 112).

Next Friday, the Hodja was back on the minbar to begin his sermon, and he called to the mass: “Oh Muslims! Do you know what I will preach unto you?” And this time, they replied: “We know.” And the Hodja told them: “Since you know, why should I bother telling you and give myself a headache.” And thus, he went away. [12]

This story is also about epistemology. It seems like Hodja wants to take one step further in his inquiry. He questions whether one could come to know what she already knows. In other words, if one knows, there is no need to seek knowledge since she already knows. If the congregation had known what Hodja would tell them, they would not be there.

Taking these two stories together, one is faced with a kind of a riddle: if one does not know X, it may not be possible to know X. And it is silly to desire to know X, since she does not know what X is. However, if she knows X, there is no need to seek to know X. Since she knows X, it is also silly to desire to know what she already knows.

Hodja makes the congregation more puzzled with his questions and continues to perplex them with the next story (Boratav, 2007, p. 112):

Coincidentally, next Friday, back on the minbar, Hodja Nasiruddin exclaimed: "Oh, Muslims! Do you know what I shall preach unto you?" Some in the mass replied, "We know," and some, "We don't." And the Hodja told them: "Those who know, preach unto those who don't," and he climbed down the minbar and went away. And thus, he ended his sermon. [13]

Hodja likes to see people confused and puzzled. It might be the case that in this way the wisdom could flourish. Or he might want to show that some philosophical questions have no exact answers, and thus one just should ponder upon them. From this perspective, the process of philosophizing may be an important act, rather than taking things at their face value. Here with these three stories intermingled with each other, while Hodja is teasing with the congregation, he may want to refer to epistemological issues as previously mentioned.

On the other hand, taking into consideration all three stories above and one below with its setting in the mosque might point out the idea of recollection rather than learning. The theory of recollection by Plato might be related with Hodja's



hidden message in this story (*Plato's Meno*, 2017, pp. 32-35). According to this theory, one does not learn, but instead remembers what she already knows. And Hodja might be trying to refer to this by his humor and questions, which puzzles the community around him. It might be the case that Hodja's role as an imam is to show what people already know. He is trying to mention that they can remember what they already know. That is why he might be doing such a talk about knowledge and striking the audience dumb.

Therefore, it can be said that Hodja's understanding of knowledge is such that everybody knows, but does not remember; thus a sage's role is to make them remember rather than transferring the knowledge. Regarding this, there is no teacher, but a facilitator who can help one to figure out what she already knows and the only medium to reach that knowledge is to remember it. Admitting this argument, one could go further and claim that everybody can access knowledge and thus be wise. The knowledge referred to here is not transferred knowledge from one to another as mentioned, but it is the one that comes from within. By "within", I mean remembering the already known. It is not something that one learns from one and teaches or transfers to someone else. Instead, one remembers and becomes wise. At this point, I should emphasize the difference between wise and knowledgeable: while wisdom comes from inside by recollecting knowledge, the other is about transferring it. If one is intelligent enough, she could become knowledgeable by reading this and that book. However, the wise one does not need any book, since she has already reached into the volume of a book inside her. She recollects and becomes wise, while the other one is seeking knowledge – in a university or in a so-called sacred book. What Hodja tries to give us as a message might be not to look further for knowledge of oneself outside, but rather inside.

Another story, which can be considered as a continuation of the previous ones is as follows (Boratav, 2007, p. 112):

So, it's told that one day Hodja Nasiruddin is on the minbar for the Friday sermon and he calls out: "Oh, members of the Jemaah! Do you know what I shall preach unto you?" Yet, this time, no one in the mass bothers for a reply. Muttering, "My, oh, my, there is nobody here," Hodja climbs down the minbar, and goes out for a stroll. [14]

As mentioned, Hodja is a trickster and as a trickster, he likes to tease people. In this story, he is teasing the whole community of believers, the Jemaah. Due to his previous speeches nobody answers him; after all every time they give out an answer, he has a response pointing out that the community is on the wrong path in answering and understanding his questions. That is why nobody gives an answer this time. Yet, the audience is more puzzled than ever. Despite his unexpected departure, it could be claimed that he still wants the audience to think upon the subject matter. This is his method of dialectics. The process of philosophizing evolves around questions and answers. It is communicative rather than solely didactical. In other words, he is not interested in transferring knowledge, but rather he prefers to put some seeds to another person in order to reveal the truth by her own self. This goes hand in hand with the theory of recollection. If one takes the thought that knowledge is hidden in all of us as true, dialectics is useful in order to reach it. On the other hand, transferring would not work for this kind of knowledge to manifest in oneself.

On the other hand, it could be interpreted from a different approach. It might be the case that Hodja refers to an ontological issue. What is God? Does God speak to oneself? Where is God? Hodja might be answering those questions as well. His sermon as the one who knows can explain to the ones who do not know might be pointing this out. God is not something that stays in the sky and speaks from there, instead God is within every one of us. Everybody has God within her. The one who

can have access to God within her has the knowledge, and thus can explain to the ones who do not know. There needs to be a body for God to speak and therefore it is through a human that it can speak. If one takes this argument as true, the conclusion is as follows: where there is a human, there is God. Therefore, instead of looking out of oneself, one should look within. This is a very heretic approach, since an orthodox religious person would consider this argument as belonging to a domain out of religion or as outright insanity. However, Hodja might be claiming that a human being is the medium so that one can have access to God if one looks inside. That is not an easy task. As mentioned in the previous story, one should die before dying in order to get a glimpse of God. Otherwise, one remains as ignorant as previously defined. This also shows how the stories are interrelated. One can interpret them in relation to each other.

Therefore, each human has the epistemological potentiality and this potential is in relation with God. It is worth mentioning that epistemology here is not a random epistemology, instead it is the one that sprouts from God. Thus, Hodja's hidden message in the story might be the nature of God and its effect in one's lives. He might be claiming that instead of going to the mosques to learn, one can find someone who knows. By someone who knows, I mean the one who has died before dying and who has access to God within herself. A real teacher might appear as such a person. And a real teacher might point someone else the direction to take on this path. In other words, she might show the ways to die before dying; in other words, she might show how to find God within oneself.

Consequently, it can be claimed that there is an ontological distinction as follows: there is God and there are bodies, but they are both part of human beings. Humans consist of body as well as God. Therefore, God will appear in the form of

human and the epistemological utterances can sprout from one's mouth. At this point, it is worth to remembering Hodja's silence towards the member of his Jemaah. His silence could be considered his preaching. It can be said that God is the pure silence and Hodja might be trying to show this with his approach towards the Jemaah. There arises a problem: once one starts to talk to explain something to others, there one loses the meaning of what she wants to say. Since God is silent and is silence itself, words will not be enough lest they destroy some part of the teaching. Therefore, even though there is a need of a body through which God can manifest, or so to say, "speak", it will lose some of its meaning; in other words, words will always be missing. However, like Hodja as a spiritual teacher, one needs a teacher to see and grasp the truth. It helps one to understand. Thus, Hodja might be showing us the importance of a teacher as well.

Below is another story, which might include some ontological hidden arguments about God and the human being. The story is as follows (Boratav, 2007, p. 123): "One day, Hodja Nasiruddin stepped into a vineyard. Just that moment, some people shouting 'You stole the grapes!' seized him. 'Hey guys! Why do you hold me? I am just God's little brother.' –Thus ended the argument." [44]

Except being a humorous story, there might also be references to a philosophical issue. The above discussion about the nature of God and human beings once again might be being put into words by Hodja with this story. In order to escape from accusations, Hodja puts forward an argument that puzzles the people around him: he says that he is God's little brother. If we take the previous discussion into account, we can see the relation between these stories. In this sense, God and human body are the two sides of human beings. In other words, a human being consists of both. Therefore, his words coincide with the ontological utterance.

As mentioned above, in the first story, Hodja likes to mock death in his stories. He does not take life seriously and therefore does not abstain from talking about and even mocking death. Death, an undesirable topic of discussion among common people, is taken into consideration as a fact that could be talked about and discussed by the Hodja. As mentioned it may be said that he is a wise sage, and thus he sees death as part of life, no different than being born. Therefore, he is not fearful of it, but instead he plays around it. The following story is centered about his approach towards death. It shows us what is his take on death (Boratav, 2007, p.

114):

Hodja Nasiruddin asked his wife: “How do you know when one is dead?” And his wife replied: “His face and hands would be cold.” Coincidentally, later one day, the Hodja went up to a mountain to chop wood. And on the road he was frozen to his marrow, so his face and hands became very cold. Seeing these symptoms, he exclaimed “Alas! I am dead!” and laid himself down. In the meantime, wolves came and ate his donkey. The Hodja rose up from the ground to say: “Yeah, it is better! You have found a lone donkey, why shouldn’t you eat it?” [20]

As mentioned earlier, “death” is a theme in Hodja’s stories. He considers death as if it is a phase in life that one should pass over, therefore not to be fearful of it. In order to display this outlook, he is not hesitant to include death in his stories and create some humor about it. This could be also in relation with his understanding of philosophy of religion. Dying before dying and thus attaining the state of nothingness might be the underlying theme in this kind of stories. These concepts are related to Sufi ideas, but it is beyond this paper’s concern to explain the issue from the Sufi perspective. However, it is worth mentioning that Hodja might be under the influence of Sufism. It is quite commonly understood that Sufism has influenced Hodja.

Dramatizing the scene of his being dead and his donkey being alone could be the reflections of these concepts. He considers himself dead so that the wolves can eat his lone donkey. It is crucial to say that he considers himself as nothing here as well. There is nothing, but the donkey in the scene. The incredible thing here is that Hodja might be implying all of these ideas, yet he never mentions them explicitly.

The concept of nothingness and dying before dying are intertwined with each other. While one has attained the state of nothingness, it could be said that she is also experiencing dying before dying. In other words, in order to feel nothing, one should die before death and vice versa. In order to experience nothingness, one should also let go of her attachments to the world of phenomena. As is previously explained in this paper, letting go of attachments requires releasing fears and desires as well. Therefore, nothingness and dying before dying are the results of each other. Or it can be claimed that one experiences both when one attains this state of consciousness, one follows the other. It could be said that it is insignificant which comes first.

The states of consciousness here mean the varying states of awareness that we experience during our lifetime. When one sleeps, her consciousness is in a state specific to that of sleeping. When one is awake, so is her consciousness. And when one attains nothingness, she experiences a different awareness than those of awake and sleeping consciousness.

These concepts (nothingness/dying before dying) seem poetic and romantic rather than philosophical; however, they refer to very important states of consciousness that are relevant to philosophy. It is almost impossible to tell what those concepts really could mean; they are more of an experience in itself, rather than mere philosophical concepts. I believe one can only speculate about those concepts, as I tried to do above; besides even a person who has experienced this state

of consciousness in nothingness cannot describe it fully. This is because it is beyond words. Therefore, words can help to describe and express, but they are never enough to state explicitly what state of consciousness in nothingness refer to in the broader sense.

Another story that reflects this topic is as follows (Boratav, 2007, p. 115):

One day Hodja Nasiruddin climbed up a tree, sat on a branch near its tip, and began to cut the branch off the trunk. A man came up to him and said, "Hey Hodja! Don't sit like that, surely you will fall." Right after that, the branch broke off, and the Hodja fell down. The Hodja immediately got hold of the man and yelled: "You knew I was going to fall; and hence you know when I shall die." The man told him "I don't," yet he couldn't cut loose from the Hodja's grip. And so, [he was] told: "When your nose and ears are cold, it is when you shall die." The Hodja let him loose at that instant. And once, at a certain place, the Hodja let himself lay on the ground and exclaimed, "I am dead." Following this incident, his donkey makes the journey back, but the Hodja was nowhere to be seen. Later, upon his return, the Hodja claimed: "I was dead, and now I am resurrected." [20 variation]

In the story above, while Hodja is teasing the audience with the theme around death, he might be also pointing out some things about ethics. Not taking things at their face value could be Hodja's advice in this story. In that regard, one does not really die, when one has cold ears and nose. Those might be the symptoms of death, but they do not directly imply that one is dead. Having realized all of these things, Hodja might have created humor and thus a story out of it. In order to show this, he might be saying that he was dead, but now he comes to life again. The one who understands him shall not consider Hodja as a previously dead person, but only a metaphor in order to point out something else. Therefore, his ethical advice could be not to take anything at face value. One should dig and try to see the real thing behind the surface value.

As mentioned, Hodja does not like to give advice explicitly. He weaves his advices into a story that one should contemplate upon, and only thereafter, could

realize the philosophy behind it. His ethical approach of not taking things at face value is also an approach one should have to his stories as well. Because otherwise stories do not open up themselves to audience/reader. One should contemplate and then contemplate again in order to grasp the hidden meaning behind the stories.

Furthermore, the concepts of dying before dying and nothingness could also be found in this story. Hodja not worrying about the fall and his possible death, and the metaphor of his resurrection could be referring to these concepts. Since they are already being explained and commented upon, I will not deal with these once more.

Let us read the following story and its variation below and contemplate

(Boratav, 2007, p. 115):

One night while Hodja Nasiruddin was sleeping, his wife told him: “Hey, husband! There is a thief in our house.” The Hodja told her: “Oh, wife! Don’t bother to tell me. If the thief finds anything to steal, we can take it from his hands.” [21]

One day, they tell the Hodja: “A bandit broke into your house. Go and catch him.” The Hodja says them: “So be it. Let him take as much as he can carry. The rest would be already enough for us.” [21 variation]

Both stories reveal hints about Hodja’s approach towards his material possessions. First of all, it seems like he does not care too much about his possessions, he is not worried about the things the thief could take from their house. He seems relaxed despite the existence of a thief in his house. This might show his approach to the material world around him. In other words, he is not attached to them. In the first story, even though the thief takes away some stuff, he says that he can take it back. And in the second, he says that they do not need the things that the thief can take. Therefore, both statements point out that less could be enough for him. There might be hidden advice not to take heed of the material possessions and have too much stuff. Hodja is giving advices that directly touch life.



Also, it could be possible to come up with a philosophical utterance behind his advice. Material things around us should not be taken so seriously, they are just out there and not too important. This is related to the concept of in-betweenness. One should take a thing as a fact, but should not get attached to it. It might be said that one should give up worrying about material things, however one should not leave them fully. This is because since every one of us is captured in a body, we already have a material possession that we cannot fully leave aside. However, being attached to it causes one to fear, and so other emotions arise from fear. On the other hand, if one takes this as a fact, it is healthier in terms of spirituality. There is a balance point in between those extremes. I believe that Hodja wants to refer to ethical issues mentioned here with this story.

As mentioned, Hodja is incredible in expressing his ideas in humor and in fiction. The following is one of those stories in which he does this very well. This one touches philosophy of religion as well as ethics (Boratav, 2007, p. 137-138):

One day on the road, Hodja Nasiruddin puts a handful of roasted chicken peas into his handkerchief. Walking and eating the roasted chickpeas, the Hodja comes upon a few boys. He calls them: "Hey, boys! Let me hand you some roasted chickpeas." The boys reply: "Yes, give it to us." Upon this, he asks: "Would you like me to distribute them out as Allah does, or as Human does?" The boys reply: "As Allah does." So Hodja Nasiruddin hands out a few to some, and much more to others. They ask "Hey Hodja! Why don't you distribute them evenly?" And the Hodja replies: "Behold! Allah gives less to some, and more to others!" So the poor boys tell him this time: "Distribute them as Human does." Upon hearing this, Hodja Nasiruddin exclaims: "Allah, o' Allah! Behold and harken! Let's assume I do not care, but see, even these poor boys do not like the way you distribute things." [90]

God, Allah as he is named, does not pursue an even distribution of materials among humans. This is the main premise of Hodja's understanding of justice. Another premise, which underlies the former, is that it is God who distributes the materials. These are Hodja's beliefs associated to philosophy of religion. One might ask where

they come from and even one can judge saying that these premises are not grounded or cannot be proved. It might be impossible to prove those premises, yet they are the basic beliefs for anyone believing in God. Therefore, I will not go to the discussion of whether to take these premises as grounding premises or not. I will rather try to focus on Hodja's scheme of God and the concept of justice that he puts forward around the belief in God.

Therefore, Hodja's belief in God makes him believe that there is an uneven material distribution and he is fine with it. In other words, he does not criticize it, and instead he accepts what is given to him and to the other people around him. Furthermore, Hodja admits that people are not happy with this situation, and thus they criticize this and demand equal distribution. In return, Hodja criticizes them for not being grateful for what they already have. This is related to the previous story's theme as well. Hodja does not care about the robbery in the previous story. And in this one, he does not care what people have or do not; even for his possessions he has an indifferent attitude. Both show that he is not interested in material possessions, and he goes further in this story by claiming that God distributes material possessions in different proportions.

I think Hodja wants to refer to the concept of justice here as well. If one takes account of what it is said in both of the stories, one can come up with an idea of justice. For him, justice does not mean equal distribution; instead it indicates merely a distribution of material goods, sometimes unevenly, by God. Moreover, he suggests an ethical approach and thus claims that people should accept what they are given by God. In other words, he recommends basically "to be happy with what one has, and not to bother oneself with the other people's possessions".

On the other hand, there is another legitimate question to ask here. God distributes the material possession unevenly, but should we, as humans, mimic God and distribute unevenly? I do not think that Hodja's purpose is to convince his audience to unequal distribution by human kind. His aim is to claim that God is not involved with the even distribution of material goods and that people should be happy with what they are given. However, he does not explicitly claim that people also should do it like that –like God, unevenly. I do not believe that Hodja's understanding of justice supports the idea that we should distribute the material goods unevenly.

Furthermore, it could be claimed that the society of Hodja's time was not happy with what they have in general. That is why Hodja might be pointing this out. I claimed as such since Hodja's aim is always to point out some stupidity of the society and thus he does not solely pursue theoretical explanations. Hodja's story might be showing one to see this as well. Hodja is critical of what he has seen around him and puts into his stories as he has done in this story. Hodja never talks about theory alone; instead he always starts by concrete examples and builds his own theory. He never gives his arguments and theories in an analytical and axiomatic way, but rather he integrates them into his stories. Here, the concept of justice is not explained as John Rawls of our times did, but rather like a riddle in the story.

The following story is rather long in comparison to the ones above. However, it is still very brief regarding the themes that it contains. Again, we are faced with Hodja's intelligence and how he incorporates philosophy within the narrative (Boratav, 2007, p. 158-159):

During the reign of Sultan Alā ad-Dīn Kayqubād bin Kaykāvūs, having perfected their religious knowledge, three priests are roaming the World, and they come upon a province under Kayqubad's rule. The Sultan summons these three scholars to convert them to Islam. And these three priests tell him: "Each one of us has a single question. Only if you can answer our questions, shall we convert to Islam, but if you cannot answer us, would you accept ours?"

And so, they agreed upon the conditions. Thus, Sultan Kayqubad gathered all the scholars, all the sheiks and all the muftis under his dominion. Alas, none was able to answer their questions.

Sultan Kayqubad wrathfully exclaimed: "I possess all these places under my dominion, all these Arab, Persian and Anatolian provinces; yet can they not find any amongst the scholars, wise men and muftis that inhabit them to come up with an answer to these questions?" Time after time, many amongst them told him: "No one is able to answer these questions, but Hodja Nasiruddin."

So the Sultan sent forth his men to find the Hodja. These men found and converged with him to convey him the situation. The Hodja told them: "Oh! Were they not able to answer these things? Quick, saddle my donkey!" And he took his staff, got on his donkey and rode to Sultan Kayqubad's palace. He entered the palace and came before his excellence. The Sultan showed him a seat and told him: "Sit!" The Hodja prayed for the Sultan and told him: "O' Sultan, I heard that you called me to service! Until I perform this service with the grace of your blessings, I shall not get down from my donkey!"

So these three monks were brought before the Hodja, and they were acquainted. The Hodja said: "Here, now, what are your questions? Do ask me!"

That instant, one came before the others and said: "First, where is the middle of the earth located?" The Hodja immediately came down from his donkey, and with his staff in his hands, he moved before the beast and showed the forefoot of the donkey, and exclaimed: "Here! The middle of the earth is where the forefoot of the donkey is." The monk replied: "How come?" In turn, the Hodja said: "If you do not believe, here, take the staff in my hand and measure the earth with it, till you arrive at one end; and then, repeat the measurement until you arrive at the other end. Only then, should you find that my measurement comes short, tell me." Hearing these words from the Hodja, the monk told him: "Is it ever possible to measure the World as you claim?" The Hodja told him: "So, is it ever possible to locate the middle of the earth?"

Upon this, another monk came before the Hodja and told him: "How many stars are there in the sky?" and the Hodja replied: "As many as the hairs on the back of my donkey." That monk claimed: "How come?" Hoca replied: "If you do not believe me, here, count the hairs on the back of my donkey. If they count less than the stars in the sky, then tell me so." The monk in response said: "Oh, is it ever possible to count the hairs on a donkey?" And the Hodja exclaimed: "So, is it ever possible to count the stars in the sky?"

So this time another monk came forward and told the Hodja: "If you can ever answer this question of mine as well, all of us shall convert to Islam." The Hodja replied: "Ask now and we shall see." That instant the

monk came forward and told Hodja: “See this beard of mine, how many hairs does it have?” The Hodja replied: “See this grey donkey, the hair in your beard is as much as the hair on the tail of that donkey.” The monk replied: “How come?” Hodja exclaimed: “If you do not believe me, count them and see.” The monk was not convinced with these words. So the Hodja told him: “Seeing that you are not convinced, let us pick one by one, a hair from your beard and a hair from the tail of the donkey,” and plucked a hair from the monk’s beard.

Deeming this impossible, the monk saw Allah’s path and immediately called upon his brothers, “I now believe,” and uttered the Islamic confession of faith. And all the other monks, too, sincerely confessed their faith in Islam, since the monk who called upon them was also the wisest among them. Seeing him convert to Islam, all the other monks instantly had become Muslims and subservient to Hodja Nasiruddin. [155]

First of all, I would like to mention that Hodja is a genius not only in humor, but also in logic as well. What Hodja does is here to convince the monks while engaging in the logical fallacy called appeal to ignorance. Appeal to ignorance is a logical fallacy when one concludes with lack of evidence. Either one says that the argument p is true because there is no evidence against p or p is false because there is no evidence for p.

The monks believe in Hodja’s answers because they do not have any evidences against his arguments. Hodja’s extreme analogies make the monks believe his arguments since they do not have any evidence against them.

Another logical formula that he is using in order to convince the monks is the *redactio ad absurdum*: The extreme points that Hodja is making with the examples of his donkey might be an example of the *redactio ad absurdum*. When one tries to prove an argument p, by denying not p concludes in contradiction and therefore leads one to believe p to be true. In other words, it might be said that one engages in this logical play while giving absurd or extreme examples in order to prove that the argument p is true. The absurd premises help one to prove p is true since otherwise one falls into contradiction.

Other than Hodja's intelligence in logic, this is an incredible story of Hodja dealing with epistemology as well as philosophy of religion. Both are intertwined with each other in the form of narration. In terms of epistemology, Hodja tries to show that not all questions have answers and furthermore, even when they have answers, it is almost impossible to deduce the exact answers. By using his donkey as an analogy, he might be taking things on earth as analogues. In other words, his donkey and its hair are more concrete than stars in the sky, in the sense that they allow for a closer observation with five senses. It is relatively easier to count the donkey's hair than the stars in the sky. However, it is also very difficult or rather almost impossible to count them like the stars in sky. Instead of answering the question of the amount of stars in the sky, Hodja shows how nonsensical it is to try to respond to this question with the analogy of his donkey. If one takes Hodja's attitude in this matter and makes a generalization, one might be ending up with the idea that we cannot answer every question. Therefore, it is not true that every question is answerable and thus knowable. This is an epistemic attitude.

Even though the number of the stars and the number of hairs on a donkey are certain and countable, all the same, it is almost impossible to count and thus to know them. Likewise, there are certain truths that can be perceived through five senses, yet at the same time, it might not prove possible to tell what they really are. Even though humankind is able to perceive them, producing an accurate knowledge of their existence is not within human capabilities. We see the stars at night when we look at the sky, but it is not within our capabilities to count them –what Hodja points out is this fact.

Moreover, dealing with epistemology makes Hodja enter the sphere of philosophy of religion as well. He might be telling us that humans and even the

hodjas, sheiks, Islamic clergy etc. cannot know everything. There are things that are beyond human knowledge. And he reflects that this must be the understanding of Hodja or a Sheikh: if one knows that she does not know everything, then she is a Muslim. In the story, Hodja convinced the monks that they cannot know everything and thereafter they were converted to Islam. This is a crucial point, because people tend to believe that they can know everything, however his analogy convinces them to understand and to grasp that omniscience is beyond human capabilities. And it is only this understanding that allows for the monks' conversion, not anything else.

First of all, as monks told him that they could only convert to Islam in case he answers all of the questions, Hodja in fact showed the absurdity in asking those kind of questions, but still has them converted to Islam. This is Hodja's strong intelligence and understanding of humor. He has altered the monks' view.

By his Platonic question-and-answer method, Hodja himself is an example of how a spiritual man should be. One should not take things as the dogma claims, but rather ponder and reflect upon them. Furthermore, one should not be the one who knows everything, but rather one who has come to a point that she knows that she does not know everything. This is related to humility. It can be said that humility is the quality of a spiritual person. Instead of considering oneself as superior to others, a spiritual person should be humble. The monks had to understand that in order to be eligible to convert to Islam: it is not necessary to come up with answers to every question, rather it is necessary to have an attitude that reflects the knowledge that one cannot answer every question.

This also tells us about the society's beliefs of Hodja's time: It could be said that according to the common understanding, one should know everything in order to

be a properly religious person. However, it is shown in this fikra that it is not the case; instead, the negation of the argument is true.

The next story is about the concept of nothingness. This was already mentioned in one of the stories; the following story is mainly focused on this theme (Boratav, 2007, p. 214):

One day on the road, the Hodja gets caught in quicksand. A man on the road seeing his hardship asks him: “Were I to rescue you from this quicksand, what would you give me?” The Hodja replies: “Nothing”. The man immediately rescues him from the quicksand. Rising up, the Hodja wants to get back to his home. The man demands: “Where are you going? Give me my due share and go.” The Hodja asks: “What is your share?” The man replies: “You said I will give you nothing. That’s what I want.” The Hodja says: “Nothing means none, nada. Can one give out none?” He says, “Of course, give me my due share.” After a time, the Hodja gives in and says: “Come to my home, and I shall give you nothing.” They arrive at his house and the Hodja brings forth an empty vessel and places it in front of the man. He tells the man: “Put your hand in to this empty vessel.” The man does so. The Hodja tells him: “Now, clench your hand tightly, and take it out.” The man clenches his fist tight inside the vessel and takes it out. The Hodja exclaims: “Now, open it.” The man does so. The Hodja asks: “What is in your hand?” The man replies: “Nothing.” The Hodja tells him: “Now that you got your due share, go your way.” So the man, having got nothing, helplessly goes his own way. [303]

The man who helped Hodja thought at first that nothing refers to something and that is why he rescued him. However, at the end, he understands that nothing does not refer to something. What Hodja does is tease him despite being rescued from the quicksand. Even though Hodja has told him that he would give nothing in return for being rescued, he rescued the Hodja expecting nothing in return. This is both a funny and a didactic story from the manner in which Hodja shows his stupidity to the man. Also, this is an example of how Hodja tries to change and alter people’s way of thinking. He wants to point out something erroneous in their belief system.

According to Hodja, it might be the case that people are so used to expecting something in return for help or a service to someone, that it might be also be the case



that they get nothing thereafter. Also, Hodja might be telling us not to expect something in return for our help. The essence of this story points towards an ethics and a philosophy of religion: A spiritual person should not expect rewards in exchange for their help. In other words, as Hodja says, she should expect nothing. Expecting nothing is related to the concept of nothingness: one can only expect nothing by achieving the state of nothingness. Once one attains that state, one is set free of material attachments, and thereafter she can truly expect nothing in return for her services. She can do it for the love of God. Since God can speak through any body as discussed in the critique of the story numbered 14, the one who is no longer ignorant by attaining the state of nothingness or the state of dying before dying can see the God within every one of us. Therefore, this can lead that person to expect nothing. I will not go further into detail regarding the concept of nothingness, since it is already mentioned and explained in depth previously.

Another story, which clearly portrays Hodja's epistemology and his recognition of a wise sage, is as follows (Boratav, 2007, p. 314):

One day a fanatic who loved to debate came to Akşehir and asked "Who is the wisest in your town?" And they describe the late Hodja to him. This fanatic searches for him and having found him, exclaims: "Master Hodja! I have forty questions for you. And I seek from you answers for my forty questions." The Hodja absentmindedly replies: "Ask me those questions," and he wholeheartedly listens to each and every question. And only after all is finished, he utters a reply: "Lâ edrî küllihâ" –meaning that in order to silence his opponent, for each and every question, he gave out a single answer: "I do not know!" [538]

A wise sage is one who has achieved the state of not knowing. She is one who has no epistemological utterances such as "I know". She is one who realizes that one cannot know everything, and therefore one who has such a humility to exclaim that she does not know. Attaining such a state of consciousness is very difficult, since it is a common phenomenon to believe the claim that one who knows more is wiser;

however, according to Hodja, this is not true. Even in his times, it should have been a common understanding so as to create a story out of it. As mentioned, his stories are grounded in his society's concerns of his time and this one also depicts this fact. Like our times, it might be said that his people were also respecting one who has more and more knowledge. However, Hodja tries to demonstrate that the other way around is more valuable, and plus, it is what makes a sage "wise".

Becoming wise is also related with the concepts of nothingness and dying before dying. One cannot separate one from another. One knows nothing when achieving those states of consciousness. One experiences God (let me say) and the wisdom comes to him. When one speaks, she speaks from God. In other words, epistemological potentiality is fulfilled and now she is wise. Even though she speaks from an approach of knowing and thus teaching to the others, she has the attitude of not knowing.

As mentioned previously in this paper, it is very difficult or even impossible to describe this state of consciousness with mere words. It is probable that one who has already experienced it would express it in a better way. What I try to do is to get closer to the idea by using my mind to grasp it, and as such, it will not be reflecting the entire experience.

There comes the question: "In what ways can one grow into a wise person?" Hodja has an answer like the following (Boratav, 2007, p. 326): "They asked the Hodja: 'What is the right path to become a [wise] man?' He replied: 'When those who know speak, one should listen wholeheartedly. And they should also hear what they are saying.'" [561]

It might be said that one who wants to be wise should have a teacher. A teacher who is aware of what she is doing. In other words, it could be said that a

master and apprentice relationship is required. An apprentice should listen to her master from the bottom of her heart. It could be said that it is a heart-to-heart relationship, rather than brain-to-brain. Or it is also possible to say one should listen and see what it points out in herself, rather than be on the receiving end of an oral knowledge-transfer from the teacher to the student. It was discussed earlier in this paper that being wise does not mean to be in possession of transferred knowledge, but rather to remember what one already knows. Therefore, the message in Hodja's story might be that a wise teacher can help to grow the seeds that one already has and this is the way one can become wise, not otherwise.

Hodja is proficient in very short philosophical utterances, but they might contain very deep meanings as the following story (Boratav, 2007, p. 328): "They asked the Hodja: 'Where is Allah?' He replied: 'Is there anywhere Allah does not exist so that one should become in need of fixing a location?'" [565]

The nature of God, Allah as he is called, is portrayed in a very brief, but concrete way in this story. According to Hodja, God is everywhere. Therefore, this implies that God does not sit in the sky. Instead, God is everywhere. There is no need to give a location for it. Even She/He/It is there in Africa or in Mecca. It does not make a difference. It also implies that wherever one goes, Allah is there as well. Another implication might be that even a mosque or a church or any other religious place does not matter. Since God is everywhere, the place is not important.

As mentioned in the previous pages, Hodja has some aim in creating those stories. In this one, his motive might be to show his community that they do not need to go to Mecca or to a mosque to find God. Even while they are at home, God is there. This is a very heretic approach too. A conservative person would react to it violently. However, Hodja is not fearful of his community; instead he wants to show

and point to the directions, which people should take. He does not like dogma as mentioned. He seeks the truth, not otherwise.

Science and metaphysics/ spirituality are embodied in Hodja's understanding. Theosophy, as it is called nowadays, is his path. He does not take each phenomenon separately. Even the stories have the potentiality of talking to each other as was previously depicted in this study. He never says that this is his ethics or this is his ontology, instead he has incorporated them into his narrative wisely.

Nasreddin Hodja gives advice about one's health as well. Since science and spirituality are complementing each other, meaning that they are affecting each other, it is probable that our minds and bodies are in relation to each other. Or in other words, it is not the case that each one has its own domain and excludes the other. Therefore, Hodja probably realizing all of this, creates a story as the following (Boratav, 2007, p. 328): "One day the Hodja told: 'This is the short summary of the science of medicine: "Keep your feet warm, and your head cool. Mind what you are eating and don't think too deep."' [566]

This story is about Hodja's advices on both physical and mental health. According to Hodja, the quality of what one is eating is important. Underneath his advice, he might be implying that one should eat what is required, meaning not less, nor more. Just what it is needed for the body. His other advice is to not to think too deep. When one thinks too much about a phenomenon, it is more likely that she gets confused. Therefore, Hodja might have realized this and that is why he might have uttered such advice.

One might ask in which aspect this story is philosophical. I think his understanding of philosophy is not something that is believed in contemporary universities. Everything in life could be philosophical for him, since every aspect of

living has influence on oneself. Therefore, it is important to know what and how to eat as well as how to think. They are also part of the things that will lead one to nothingness/dying before dying. As mentioned previously in this paper, he considers these phenomena as one unit. Simply put, he has a holistic approach. And this story is one example. His advice is quite important for one's both mental and physical health.

As mentioned in the introduction part of this paper, it might be claimed that Hodja tries to normalize sexuality. He speaks of it as if it is a need like drinking or eating. It can be also said that he considers sexuality, in general terms, as a daily matter. This is a very crucial point since it brings out to what extent he is a heterodox, and thus how much he is opposed to conservatism around him. It is shown in this paper that his community was conservative and most of the stories are put forward to shed light on this issue. It is plausible to think that he wants to point this out in order to make people conscious of it, and therefore to make them abandon their conservatism. It might be claimed that his role is to reveal those hardened and solidified beliefs in the society. One needs to reconsider her deep beliefs that she considers to be the ultimate truths.

So let us consider an exemplary story on sexuality: There are plenty of Nasreddin Hodja stories in which the subject matter is sexuality, and to say the least, Hodja's use of language is sharp. Here a warning would be proper, since I have tried to remain faithful to Hodja's use of language –that is I did not sterilize his words. It is as follows (Boratav, 2007, p. 147):

One day on a walk, Hodja Nasiruddin came upon a stallion attempting to copulate with a mare, but to no avail. The mare was kicking the stallion wildly. He rushed back home, and said to his wife: “Hey, woman! I have just learned a sweet fucking position, just let me show you: Though mind that when I try to fuck you, you will kick me non-stop.” So, the wife did as she was told, and Hodja was left with a hernia. Hodja Nasiruddin cried: “Fuck that stallion, fuck that mare, and fuck that fucking!” [120]



## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

First of all, it should be said that the stories mentioned above have complemented each other to a certain extent. Therefore, what Hodja does is to portray a holistic approach. In other words, a phenomenon is put forward in relation to other phenomena, not otherwise. And this makes one understand the stories better if one reads more stories and contemplates upon them. Reading and thinking about them in relation to each other opens up new insights and helps better grasp the hidden messages within the stories.

Secondly, what is worth mentioning once again is his heretic approach. As explained in Chapter 2, Hodja is a heretic; he holds divergent views with respect to his society. And I believe that some stories are put forward in order to show how his society is corrupted and how can it be better. It can be said that he is pointing out the dogmas and the misunderstanding of his society, (taking the sampled stories in the paper into account) especially in the subject matter of religion. I believe that if he was a real historical figure, from the perspective of his society, he must have been not an easy person to deal with.

Thirdly and as a consequence of the above mentioned argument, these stories are clues in order to learn about his society. He strongly argues against their beliefs and puts forward his own arguments and theories. He does not do it explicitly, but in a very poetic way as mentioned. Stories are ways to normalize the taboos of his society. Taboos about religion, ethics and sexuality are emphasized in the stories chosen for this paper. It is not proper to say that his society has more taboos around these subjects in comparison with a contemporary one just by an overview of the

stories in this paper. However, I propose even when the whole corpus of his stories are put in perspective, one can come up with a similar conclusion. Yet, these storied prove those subject matters were problematic.

In conclusion, here in this thesis I propose that whether Nasreddin Hodja stories are the production of another person or the account of a historical figure known as Nasreddin Hodja, they are not just for a few laughs: His bizarre, striking, dumbfounding, seemingly irrational accounts deal, more often implicitly, with very deep issues regarding ethics, philosophy and religion. The stories in this thesis that were selected for a philosophical inquiry reflect philosophical issues regarding ontology, epistemology, ethics of social life (on a person's relationship not just with other persons, but also her relationship with God) and philosophy of religion ("What is God?" and "Where is God?").

These philosophical inquiries reflected in Hodja's stories are riddled with Sufi ideals: namely, dying before dying and freedom through nothingness. These ideas as reflected in these stories promote a true religiosity, not fed and bred with dogmas, but with a spirituality in which God and humans are siblings, and the silent God is as close as our bodies, through which (after deep inquiry and reconsidering the socially fed, socially bound, dogmatic truths) we can speak out with God's wisdom.

Hodja is not bound by social norms in his spontaneous action and in his material freedom as reflected from many stories that do not care about having or not having is an exemplary sage, unfettered with traditional knowledge. His stories might make use of logical fallacies such as appeal to ignorance and rhetorical devices such as *reductio ad absurdum*, yet his stories reflect a non-axiomatic, poetic ontology: of being, in this world. Being in this world, an existence that cannot be



measured by material possessions or countable knowledge requires a deeper search within to make connection with God, or one's true nature if you like. The knowledge of this being, this epistemological take on life proposes that one should remember what he knows and search within, and as mortals, one cannot know everything: omniscient knowledge is barred to humans. Yet, as reflected in his stories, we as a society, value material goods and countable knowledge more than anything, whereas God is silent and just (in his own ways); and God (or the world as God's reflection) is unknowable and his knowledge is not transferable.

In his capacity as a Sage and a Trickster, Nasreddin Hodja, claims that there is yet an epistemological potentiality within us, and as his camel on chimney syllogism can lead us, the source of this potential lies within God.

Knowing that all is not knowable and that choosing humility in the face of accumulation of knowledge and possession is as reflected in Hodja's stories, part of being a devout, yet spiritual Muslim. A sage should and can either admit this in the face of fanatics by uttering "Lâ edrî küllihâ" –I do not know– or mock, tease and even act plainly stupid against the unquestioning masses that come every Friday to the mosque (despite being mocked) just so as to kindle the search for existence and knowledge. This in a sense is the function of these fikras.

Humor in Nasreddin Hodja stories, despite being seemingly non-sensical and off-handedly breaking the taboos, instigates one to deeper questions on Truth. This Truth in Nasreddin Hodja's stories is elastic and fluid, in-between the physical reality and the spiritual existence of our bodies – and ultimately, funny.

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