

Plato and the goatherd

A story by Salam Al Rassi

When I was young, I used to quotes from famous writers or philosophers, which I often used when I needed to prove a point or end an argument. One day in the village we were discussing the question of this strange and astonishing creature called 'man'.

Someone among those present asked for a correct definition. This sparked a discussion that went on and on, and caused a big argument among us.

I said in a loud voice: "Listen my friends. Plato, the father of all philosophers, says: "man is a rational being, not more, not less." I continued: "If the animal speaks, it will then be equal to man."

Abu Faraj who was a goatherd, stood up, looked at me and said: "Who's this fellow, the father of philosophers that you just mentioned?"

"Haven't you heard of Plato, the great philosopher who lived before Christ and whose words are still as good as gold?" I replied.

"No, no," said Abu Faraj, the goatherd. "Your father of philosophers is mistaken... I have the correct definition of man."

I smiled, looked at him with astonishment and asked: "Based on your experience, what is man then?"

"Based on my experience, man is a lying animal, not more... not less... If the animal can learn lies, then he can speak, compose poetry, and can sit with you and me and talk philosophy."

I looked at Abu Faraj and said to myself: "This is an idea that never occurred to me before. Man is a lying animal. We have been teaching Plato's philosophy at schools and universities for two thousand years. Can you imagine how astonishing, exciting and frustrating it will be if the goatherd of the village of Ibel Al-Saqi can prove that Plato was stupid and ignorant?"

I remembered here my cousin who had spent ten years preparing a 600-page dissertation on Plato's philosophy. Oh my God, had this been a waste of time?

"What's your proof that animals don't lie?" I asked. Abu Faraj replied without any hesitation: "Be patient and listen". This was the story he told:

"During the First World War, the Ottoman government used to draft young men in the army and send them to war, a thing which forced many of them to flee and hide.

The government used to chase those deserters, punish them once they were caught and punish anyone who gave them shelter or help.

One day a fugitive from the city of Baalbek fled to Ibel Al-Saqi and took refuge in Hajj Mitri's house.

Hajj Mitri offered him work as a labourer. They agreed they would deny knowing each other if he were caught by the Ottoman army.

After sometime the fugitive's story was spread in town. He was scared and ran away to the neighboring village Rashayya Al-Fukhar. Few months later he was caught by a Turkish officer called Fahmi Agha.

"So you are Hajj Mitri's labourer," the officer said. "No I am not." the fugitive replied. "I don't know Hajj Mitri. I know nothing about him."

Officer Fahmi took the fugitive back to Ibel Al-Saqi and knocked at Hajj Mitri's door. Hajj Mitri denied knowing anything about the fugitive. And so did Hajj Mitri's wife and his four children.

It just happened that the officer's eyes fell on a dog, tied to a trunk of an old tree, shaking his tail happily at seeing his old friend after a long absence.

Suddenly, the officer caught Hajj Mitri by the neck and said to him: "You liar. You've taught your wife to lie. You've taught your children to lie. But you were not able to teach this shameful habit to your dog."

Then the officer ordered the dog to be unleashed. The fugitive and the dog ran to each other to hug and kiss like two lovers meeting after a long separation.

From the book, Hees Bees (Naufal). Adapted and translated from Arabic for The Daily Star by Hanna H. Farha.

